



A Strong Coalition Between the EU and CELAC Will Essentially Contribute to Drug Policy Renewal

*by Thanasis Apostolou**

The relationship between Latin America and South East Europe (SEE) concerning drugs is very limited. This does not mean that the interest of SEE countries about developments in drug policy in Latin America is absent. Diogenis, a nongovernmental, non-profit organisation in Athens, working in the region of South East Europe follows closely the drug policy developments in Latin America. The recent legislative initiatives in drug policy in several Latin American countries are subject of public discussion and a source of inspiration and hope for the needed reforms in drug law and the change of approach to the drugs phenomenon. The countries in South East Europe face similar problems as the Latin American Countries with overcrowded prisons whose population is to a large percentage people who have been sentenced for drug possession for personal use, or who have committed drug-related offences of a minor non-violent nature. Also in the field of treatment, harm reduction and rehabilitation of drug users face the countries in SEE similar problems of inadequate services. Diogenis organised during the last decade jointly with the Transnational Institute a series of annual Informal Drug Policy Dialogues with participation of policy makers, experts and practitioners from Europe, Latin America, Canada, the USA and Asia. This informal international platform was an opportunity to think out the box, exchange experiences, discuss initiatives and get feed back on concrete proposals. In this respect it is good to see that the cooperation between the EU and the LA and Caribbean countries has developed in recent years. It is an investment that promotes mutual understanding and creates opportunities for cooperation and support by the introduction of good practices that are successful and effective.

The dynamic that characterizes the initiatives of Latin American countries in the field of drugs is accelerating drug policy change. The legalisation on cannabis in Uruguay, Chile, Colombia and eventually other countries that will follow, are examples of a movement to breake with a system that has so many negative consequences for societies and causes so much suffering to individuals. Europe is more reserved in undertaking steps to change legislation in the way that countries in Latin America do. In practice several European countries have introduced since the '70s of the last century measures that have been heavily criticised by the International Narcotics Drug Control Board (INCB) as violations of the UN international drug conventions. The argument used by European countries was that these changes fit in and are in conformity with the current drug control system. It is a question of interpretation. So are coffee shops, supervised drug consumptions sites, heroin



assisted treatment for high risk populations and decriminalisation of possession of drugs for personal use common practices in several European countries. The way these regulations have been introduced created in some cases inconsistencies, which are not logical and cause confusion. The coffee shops in the Netherlands demonstrate this clearly. It is difficult to accept the logic that you can sell cannabis in coffee shops with permission of the authorities, but it is illegal to produce and supply the cannabis that is sold in the coffee shops. This inconsistency is a result of compromises that cannot be corrected even by decisions of the parliament and pressure of the local authorities to change the law¹. Both the Latin American and the European model of practices that are criticised by the INCB are challenging the system, but from a different angle. I think that the Latin American model to embed drug policy reforms in legislation, is more consistent and correct than the model followed in Europe. The important issue is, however, which of the two models brings us closer to a real reform of the system. It is a challenge for the EU-CELAC cooperation on drugs to find common ground on this issue. An unanimous coalition between the EU and CELAC on this question of strategic importance, will be a big step forward for the renewal of the drug policy system.

The upcoming UNGASS is also an opportunity to provide guidance about this issue. The draft texts for the preparations on the UNGASS are, however, silent and actually ignore important aspects of the developments that are taking place in the world, like the legalisation of Cannabis in several states of the USA and Latin American Countries. The texts do not include the words “harm reduction” which remain a taboo and the issue of decriminalisation of drug users is not answered. The UNGASS must recognize that new ways to approach the drugs issue are not against international co-operation and international agreements, but a call to amend and correct the provisions that constitute an obstacle for the establishment of a more humane and effective drug policy.

NGOs will continue to contribute to this debate with arguments and proposals, but they are not the decision makers. It is encouraging and a good sign that at all levels from the UN, up to intergovernmental bodies and national states, NGOs and the scientific community are involved in the dialogue regarding the development and implementation of drug policies. The EU and CELAC could strengthen this co-operation with the NGOs

¹ In 2002, the motion Apostolou c.s to regulate the production and supply of cannabis for the coffee shops was adopted by the Dutch Parliament, but the motion was not implemented by the government. In recent years more than 60 mayors from the largest cities of the Netherlands required to get permission to regulate themselves the production and supply of cannabis for the coffee shops in their municipalities, without success. In both cases the argument to refuse implementation of the decisions of either the parliament or the city councils was that the international conventions do not allow such regulation.



and the scientific community by creating more possibilities for joint dialogues, exchange views and experiences. That will be for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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