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NOTE

From: Croatian Presidency

To: Delegations

Subject: Croatian Presidency's summary of the discussions at the informal meeting of the members of the EU - Western Balkans Expert Meeting on Drugs (videoconference, 17 June 2020)

Delegations will find in annex the Croatian Presidency's summary of the discussions at the above-mentioned meeting.

Informal VTC EU-Western Balkans Expert Meeting on Drugs

(Wednesday, 17 June 2020, 10.00 - 13.00)

Presidency's summary of discussions

1. Adoption of the agenda

The draft agenda as agreed between the EU Member states and the Western Balkans partners was adopted.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on the drugs situation

The representative of the Commission presented EU general action to tackle the pandemic, the support to the Western Balkans partners in this area, and the work in the UN and WHO framework. This included the Special Event of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world drug situation, co-sponsored by the EU and UNODC (26 June 2020).

The representative of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions (EMCDDA) presented the Agency's action to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19 for people who use drugs and for drugs services. Activities included a resources webpage, a series of webinars and a trendspotter study which was underway. The preliminary results showed a decline in the availability of European treatment and harm reduction interventions during the first two months of the pandemic, followed by adaptations in harm reductions services to facilitate continuity of services. Those adaptations may provide avenues for the future, especially in times of crisis, such as the use of telemedicine in addition to face-to-face services, a relaxation of regulations allowing a greater number of opioid users to access opioid substitution treatment, and efficient coordination between the public and the private sectors and the NGOs.

In relating with the findings of the "EU Drug Markets - Impact of COVID-19" Report published by EMCDDA and Europol in May 2020, the representative of Europol stressed that the restriction measures led to temporary shortages of, and higher prices for drugs in some places, but did not affect trafficking via maritime route. Distribution and retail sales were more disrupted due to social distancing measures, and OCGs remained active and resilient, adapting transportation models, trafficking routes and concealment methods.

Following the presentations, an exchange of information took place between the partners, on the impact of the restrictions measures related to COVID-19 on the drugs situation, on the exchange of information between partners and on the investigations and seizures that took place during the crisis period. Overall, the impact witnessed so far in the Western Balkans region mirrored the main findings on the EU side.

3. Evidence-based policy on drugs, including the establishment of national drug observatories and of early warning systems

The representative of the EMCDDA, supported by the representative from the European Commission, praised the cooperation built since 2007 with Western Balkans partners, at scientific and technical level, in relation to capacity building and data collection. He went through the various cooperation activities and results, emphasising the importance of all Western Balkan partners progressing towards working arrangements on the model of the one signed with Albania and of the one to be signed soon with Serbia. Work was under way on a working arrangement with Kosovo*¹. He called for progress on the establishment of national early warning systems (NEWS) on new psychoactive substances (NPS). Finally, the representative of the EMCDDA outlined plans under the IPA 7 technical cooperation project launched by the EMCDDA in July 2019, confident that the IPA funding from the EU would facilitate further cooperation between the EMCDDA and the Western Balkans partners.

* *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*

In addition, the representative from the European Commission underlined EU continued support, welcomed the progress made by several partners on the drug strategies, and called for adequate financial and human resources to implement the national strategies and to adopt national action plans on drugs.

The representative of Albania welcomed the signature of the working arrangement with the EMCDDA, stressing that this would facilitate the establishment of an early warning system for new psychoactive substances.

The representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina informed the participants of the current national discussions to legalise cannabis for medical purposes. Bosnia and Herzegovina had a national drug strategy 2019-2023 based on the EU strategy, but a national action plan remained to be developed. In addition, discussions were ongoing to develop procedures to ban new psychoactive substances. There was no national drug observatory in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Cooperation was being pursued with the EMCDDA.

The representative of Montenegro provided information on the ongoing work towards the establishment of a national early warning system.

The representative of North Macedonia reported on a recent law transposing the EU acquis on the definition of NPS, and provided information on medical cannabis schemes, with a process including the license given by the State to 55 companies to cultivate cannabis for medical purposes. She also stressed that the development of a new national drugs strategy would be worked upon to follow the 2014-2020 national strategy. Further work was expected in the months to come to create a cannabis agency in line with UN conventions.

4. Drug supply reduction, including cooperation with Europol

The Croatian Presidency called for increasing operational cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans partners, as outlined in the Zagreb Declaration.

A representative of the Croatian Ministry of Interior presented a regional perspective underlining the involvement of the region in cocaine trafficking, in particular through the Balkan Cartel, and presented EMPACT operational actions in this regard.

The representative from the Commission called for increasing cooperation, including through the exchange of information, the participation in EMPACT activities, but also strengthened law enforcement and judicial cooperation. She stressed that the continued support through IPA programs should help strengthen capacities.

The representative of Europol provided information on organised crime groups from the Western Balkans region, their involvement in drugs and their threat to security in this region as well as in the EU. He presented EMPACT activities and the High Value Targets and operational Task Forces concepts. He praised the both reactive and proactive information flow with Serbia and Montenegro, noting that for the other partners, information flow was reactive or missing. The SIENA connection was effective, although one of the Western Balkans partners still needed to create a and a national unit at Europol. To develop cooperation, building trust was essential, and trust could be built on operational successes. He insisted that situational awareness was crucial for the investigations.

The representative from Albania mentioned its strategy against organised crime and terrorism, and the national plan against cannabis cultivation. He explained cocaine and heroin were transiting through Albania. He highlighted the good cooperation with Europol, especially since the deployment of a Europol Liaison Officer in this country, and praised the usefulness of SIENA.

The representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina referred to the cooperation agreement with Europol and to some exchange of information and statistics. He explained that mainly cannabis but also cocaine and heroin were transiting through Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The representative from Montenegro viewed cooperation with Europol as excellent, and pointed to the identification of vessels used by organised crime groups as an example.

Finally, a representative of Germany presented their activities in cooperation with the Albanian government, including the activities of the Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development (GPPD), a GIZ project commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The global project has initiated operations in Albania in 2019 in cooperation with the Albanian Ministry of Interior, including policy advice and pilot measures for alternative development, mainly to create legal alternatives to cannabis cultivation.
