



**RATIONAL
ADDICTION POLICY:**

CZECHIA AS A MODEL FOR THE EU

Memorandum in the context of the European Parliament's elections for 2024 – 2029

The topic of addictions has been understated at the level of both Member States and the European Union (EU) for a long time. Although the health and social burden associated with licit and illicit drugs is significant, the EU institutions have paid only little attention to the problem of addiction during this electoral period and have continued to pursue policies that are ineffective and do not bring a fundamental change. The new mandate of the European Parliament (EP) and the European Commission (EC) presents a key opportunity to remedy this situation, change the conceptual outlook, and redefine priorities. The purpose of this document is, in particular, to define challenges, opportunities, and proposals to address a rational addiction policy in the EU during the 2024-2029 legislative term. At the same time, the memorandum calls on elected representatives to rely on proven scientific sources in their decision-making. This is the only way to achieve a modern regulatory framework that, instead of persecution on the one hand and inadequate regulation on the other, offers a smart policy that reduces both health and social harm.

In Prague, 4 April 2024

Institute for Rational Addiction Policies
Harm Reduction Academy



CZECHIA AS A MODEL EXAMPLE

The Czech Republic has gradually integrated addiction topics (legal and illegal drugs, as well as addiction behavior which is not related to substances) into one policy. This is a logical and scientifically supported step that other European countries are gradually taking as well. This integration makes it possible to effectively track the relative significance and social harmfulness of individual phenomena. The holistic approach has a significant impact not only on a rational and balanced illegal drug policy, but it also helps to increase the emphasis on public health aspects of tobacco, alcohol policy and, more broadly, on the whole sector of addiction phenomena in the context of public health.

Czech addiction policy has been formulated as a modern, comprehensive, and reflecting scientifically proven concepts. The concept of harm reduction has been part of the Czech drug policy since the early 1990s and has gradually become the central goal and measure of the Czech drug strategy. This approach is based on minimizing the adverse health, economic, and social impacts associated with the existence of legal and illegal psychoactive substances and addiction phenomena. Harm reduction also became the official policy of the United Nations (UN) in 2024, when on 22 March 2024, the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in its 67th session adopted a resolution recognizing harm reduction as an integral part of drug policy. This was achieved with the significant contribution of the Czech Republic. The resolution, among other things, calls on Member States to introduce harm reduction measures as part of their domestic strategies.

In this context, it should be emphasized that the reduction of risks in the area of addiction is part of the Program Declaration of the Government of the Czech Republic from 6th January 2022¹, which states that *“to address the problem of addiction, we will implement a policy based on a scientifically proven and balanced concept of risk prevention and harm reduction, while ensuring adequate funding for both preventive programs and services, and regulation of addictive substances that corresponds to their level of harmfulness”*.

Thanks to a long tradition of a comprehensive and scientific approach to addiction and elements of rational dependence policy in key documents of the Government of the Czech Republic and partial regulations², the Czech Republic is one of the leaders in modern addiction and dependence policies in the EU. We, therefore, appeal to the candidates for the European Parliament and elected representatives, in collaboration with scientists and experts, to help with setting the agenda of modern and effective addiction policy and regulation, while refraining from implementing an ineffective policy based on prohibition and the chimerical ideology of a drug-free world.

1. Government of the Czech Republic (<https://vlada.gov.cz/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-193547>)

2. For example, currently discussed proposal of so called psychomodulation law (Návrh zákona, kterým se mění zákon č. 167/1998 Sb. o návykových látkách a další související zákony) or regulation of nicotine pouches which entered into force on 1 July 2023 (Vyhláška č. 141/2023 Sb.)



LACK OF COMMON EU APPROACH

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and other global socio-economic problems, the discussion on health care, including addiction and drug policy, is increasingly moving from Member States to the EU level. In this process, it is essential that the EU institutions not only communicate with the government actors but also work with civil society, non-governmental organizations, and independent experts. Likewise, EU institutions should draw on relevant data when formulating their recommendations, and any decision should be based on scientific evidence.

Unfortunately, it must be noted that some of the key EU institutions do not currently fulfill this role. A report “Roadmap to Combat Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime”³, recently published by the European Commission, is based on the prohibitive paradigm of “fighting drugs”. The effectiveness of this principle has been repeatedly challenged and its validity is unsustainable in the light of modern knowledge on addictions and addiction policies. Similarly, while the results of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Europol⁴ provide valuable insights into the current situation with both legal and illegal substances, their conclusions and interpretations are influenced by this prohibitionist ideology. In many ways, these documents are an example of “policy-based evidence” and several interpretations thus lack a scientific basis. Moreover, they often do not reflect the broader context, and the profound shortcomings of an outdated European drug policy framework are persistently based on the prohibition principle. The same problem affects also other EU agencies and institutions, often in connection with the lack of understanding and application of the principle of risk reduction.

On the other hand, some of the Commission’s initiatives that respond to the current challeng-

es of European society, such as the “Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health”, should be appreciated. This document from June 2023 represents a key milestone for implementing changes in an area that is rapidly gaining global and regional importance. Even here, however, the interplay between poor mental health and addictive disorders remains not reflected properly. The interplay is not only a scientific fact, but also an urgent social problem with a significant impact on the quality of life, health, and public budget.

Similarly to the field of harm reduction, the Czech Republic also has the potential to be one of the EU’s leading countries in defining the next steps in the area of the above-mentioned interplay between mental health addictions. In December 2022, the Czech Presidency adopted the EU Council Conclusions on Human Rights in Drug Policy⁵, which significantly contributed to a paradigm shift in drug policy from meaningless criminalization of sick people to rational drug policy and greater humanization of policies within the EU. Moreover, on 14 November 2022, the Czech Presidency organized an international conference in Brussels titled “Resilient Mental Health in the EU”⁶ and after several years brought the issue of mental health back to the top of the EU agenda. The subsequent Presidencies of Sweden, Spain, and Belgium followed this trend and mental health has become one of their health priorities.

3. Communication of the EC to the EP and the Council from 18 October 2023 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/CS/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0641>)

4. For example report of EMCDDA and Europol from March 2024 “EU Drug Markets Analysis 2024: Key insights for policy and practice” (<https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/europol-and-emcdda-spotlight-drug-related-violence-in-latest-market-overview>)

5. Council of the EU (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15818-2022-INIT/en/pdf>)

6. Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic (<https://mzd.gov.cz/resilient-mental-health-in-the-european-union/>)



In the context of the above-mentioned, we, as representatives of academia, and independent experts on addictions and public health, believe that a future rational addiction policy in the EU must be based on the following pillars:

EVIDENCE-BASED REGULATION

Regulation of psychoactive substances and addictive products should be based on scientifically proven knowledge and systematic data, not on subjective impressions, feelings, or assumptions, often arising from ignorance or in response to unfounded public sentiment calling for irrational and urgent regulatory measures. The starting point for regulating psychoactive substances and product addictions must be a comprehensive assessment of their risk profile based on the latest data, and its subsequent placement in the context of other (often already regulated) substances or products.

EU SECURITY AND RULE OF LAW

As a result, prohibition creates an illegal market and strengthens the influence of criminal organized groups offering prohibited products thus promoting corruption and money laundering. Moreover, it also strengthens the influence of criminal groups and undemocratic regimes over illicit drug trafficking. Promoting the idea of a drug-free world increases spending on law enforcement and security, while profits from illegal trade strengthen criminal structures and hostile regimes that pose threats to security and the rule of law. Europe, therefore, is spending a considerable amount of money on a prohibition regime that ultimately threatens its principles and values.

FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The use of psychoactive substances fulfills legitimate psychological and social functions and needs for which EU citizens are often disproportionately punished. The disproportionate nature of the prohibition enforced by criminal instruments stands out in contrast to the availability of alcohol. Alcohol (ethanol) is a drug with a high addiction potential. At the same time, a drug that is toxic, carcinogenic, and teratogenic. Nevertheless, in Europe, it performs the function of a social drug, whose use is tolerated, and its offer is protected by strict regulation. On the other hand, users of other psychoactive substances and people who deal with them, including people suffering from addiction are subject to strict punishment and enforcement policies.



HARM REDUCTION

The public health concept of harm reduction should become the main principle and measure in the formulation of strategies and regulations in the field of addiction, both at national and European levels. The ideological outputs of a drug-free world and prohibition with an emphasis on repression should be abandoned. Psychoactivity should not be an automatic reason for prohibition. The supply of addictive products should be strictly regulated according to their harmfulness and users should be adequately informed about the effects and risks.

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT SUPPORT

Member States and the European Union must ensure greater accessibility and better financing of voluntary treatment for addiction, including substitute treatment and other measures. Prevention and as-

sistance to people who have lost control over their substance use must also be strengthened. Protection of children and adolescents, as well as other risk groups, is also an integral part of prevention.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

Member States and the European Union must invest in drug and addiction policy research and adapt their strategies to the latest scientific findings. The impact of regulation must be regularly monitored and adjusted if necessary.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Member States and the European Union should strive to reform the existing global drug policy and, instead of prohibition, promote a modern, progressive approach to regulation based on the aforementioned pillars, with a particular emphasis on the principle of harm reduction and scientific evidence-based measures.

We call on the candidates for the European Parliament, the newly elected MEPs, and the European Commission to consider the above points in their activities and future decision-making. At the same time, we call on future MEPs to consider setting up a new informal group within the European Parliament after the European elections in June 2024 which would deal with addiction and drug policy in greater detail. The activity of such a platform would enable better transferability of the experience with the Czech model of progressive regulation of substances and policy in the field of addiction, both with other Member States, but also with EU institutions, which are directly involved in the formulation of recommendations and legislative framework.



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