

798. Israel reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in multiple challenges, including an increase in the use of drugs and alcohol among teenagers and youth, an increase in the use of drugs and alcohol among former drug users and an increase in sales of NPS, including through the use of messaging platforms and home delivery. Several mitigating mechanisms were applied, including declaring drug use treatment service providers “essential workers” to avoid interruption of their services, increasing the use of Internet-based and telephone follow-up calls, providing services outdoors and supplying medicines for longer-term use at home.

## E. Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic had a limited impact on the illicit supply of and demand for drugs in Europe as traffickers adapted to pandemic restrictions, altering both international trafficking routes and domestic distribution channels.

Intelligence-led investigations, based on information gained from intercepted encrypted communications devices, gave law enforcement authorities in Europe critical insights into the functioning of drug trafficking groups, led to seizures of significant quantities of trafficked drugs and resulted in the launch of several criminal proceedings.

Countries in the region continue to adopt legislative changes broadening the use of cannabis products for medical and scientific purposes. Some have also entered into political debate on permitting the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes.

### 1. Major developments

799. Illicit demand for drugs continues to be high in Europe, and the manufacture of illicit synthetic drugs (mainly for trafficking to other regions of the world) continues to be a challenge in the region. Europe remains a lucrative and attractive destination and transit region for cocaine smuggled from South America and for cannabis resin from North Africa.

800. In a recent judgment, the European Court of Justice ruled that CBD extracted from the cannabis plant should not be considered a drug under the 1961

Convention as amended or the 1971 Convention; several countries are in the process of adjusting their national laws to align them with that ruling. In that regard, the Board reminds Member States that, at the reconvened sixty-third session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, in December 2020, the States members of the Commission rejected the recommendation of WHO that a footnote be added to the entry for cannabis and cannabis resin in Schedule I of the 1961 Convention as amended to exempt from international control preparations containing predominantly CBD and not more than 0.2 per cent of *delta*-9-THC. In Switzerland, amendments that set out the requirements for pilot projects on the controlled distribution of cannabis for non-medical purposes came into effect in May 2021. Meanwhile, several European Union member States have adopted legislative changes to broaden the use of cannabis products for medical purposes.

801. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a limited impact on the supply of and demand for illicit drugs in Europe, and the adaptability of criminal networks was even more notable in the second wave of pandemic lockdowns, in the second half of 2020. Levels of synthetic drug manufacture and the availability of cocaine remained stable despite the restrictions on movement and other COVID-19 control measures, according to EMCDDA. Changes in smuggling routes due to border disruptions were observed, notably the shift from land to maritime routes for the trafficking of heroin from West Asia and of cannabis resin from Morocco to Europe. Although levels of most drug use decreased during the initial lockdowns in 2020, they increased again once restrictions were lifted. Most treatment services resumed operation after June 2020, although at reduced capacity because of COVID-19 preventive measures.

802. Although the number of first-time notifications of NPS reported each year is decreasing, their continuing prevalence on the drug market, together with non-scheduled and designer precursors, creates challenges for regulatory, law enforcement and judicial authorities in Europe. Meanwhile, increasingly complex patterns of drug use, in particular the use of designer benzodiazepines, pose significant difficulties for drug prevention and treatment services.

803. Several high-profile cases involving the decryption of encrypted communications devices used to further illicit criminal activities by organized criminal groups took place in Europe in 2020 and 2021. Law enforcement authorities gained access to hundreds of millions of encrypted messages, leading to a clampdown on criminal activities in different countries in Europe and beyond,

including large-scale seizures of drugs and precursor chemicals and the dismantling of illicit laboratories. In addition, valuable information on the functioning of criminal networks was discovered. Such cases show that drug traffickers use encrypted software as their primary means of communication.

## 2. Regional cooperation

804. In December 2020, the Council of the European Union approved the European Union Drugs Strategy 2021–2025. The strategy provides the overarching political framework and sets priorities for the drug policy of the European Union for the next five years. In June 2021, the Council approved an action plan setting out activities, indicators, timelines and the designated responsible institutions to implement the strategy by: (a) addressing illicit drug trafficking through drug supply reduction; (b) protecting public health through an increased focus on prevention and access to treatment and care services; and (c) responding to drug-related harms.

805. In December 2020, Europol hosted its fourth international drugs conference online, which provided a platform for senior law enforcement officials to enhance their situational awareness of drugs and discuss operational responses. The meeting led to the establishment of the dedicated Drugs Unit within Europol, reflecting the European Union's prioritization of the issue in the Europol Strategy 2020+.

806. In December 2020, Serbia and EMCDDA signed a new working arrangement that provides for greater cooperation in monitoring the phenomenon of drug use in Europe through the exchange of expertise between Serbian authorities and EMCDDA and the further development of that country's drug data-collection and reporting capacity.

807. On 28 October 2021, the Pompidou Group celebrated its fiftieth anniversary under the motto "Human rights at the heart of drug policies". The Pompidou Group is the Council of Europe's intergovernmental drug policy cooperation platform. It consists of 41 European and 3 non-European countries and its core mission is promoting multidisciplinary and evidence-based drug policies in member States. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a revised statute of the Pompidou Group that promotes the Group's focus on human rights and public health and extends its mandate to foster collaboration with other international organizations.

808. Authorities in Belgium, France and the Netherlands, in cooperation with Europol and Eurojust, disrupted the activities of criminal organizations by dismantling an encrypted communications tool, Sky ECC, which was being exploited for criminal purposes. The information led to several law enforcement operations in February and March 2021, including several seizures of cocaine at the port of Antwerp, Belgium, totalling more than 27 tons, and resulted in the launch of several criminal proceedings.

809. The Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States, in cooperation with Europol and national authorities from 16 countries in Europe, North America and Australia, carried out an international law enforcement operation through an encrypted platform, Anom, covertly managed by the Bureau. Operation Trojan Shield and Operational Task Force Greenlight targeted criminal organizations that had increasingly made use of encrypted communications platforms for illicit purposes. By June 2021, the operation had resulted in over 800 arrests and seizures of more than 8 tons of cocaine, 22 tons of cannabis and cannabis resin, 2 tons of amphetamine and methamphetamine and 6 tons of synthetic drug precursors. The 27 million intercepted messages on Anom also provided critical intelligence revealing to law enforcement authorities the functioning of criminal groups involved in large-scale drug smuggling.

810. In Operation Ferro, a submarine constructed in Europe for use in drug trafficking was seized by police in Spain in cooperation with other countries and Europol in March 2021. The semi-submersible vessel was being built when it was seized and would have been able to carry up to 2 tons of drugs. Operation Ferro took place in various Spanish cities and also led to the seizures of 3.2 tons of cocaine, 6,000 litres of precursor chemicals and 700 kg of cannabis resin and the dismantling of an illicit cannabis laboratory.

811. In March 2021, a joint operation between law enforcement entities in Hungary and Norway, as well as Europol and Eurojust, resulted in the dismantling of an illicit laboratory and the seizure of over 9 million falsified clonazepam tablets in Hungary. A further 250 kg and 300 litres of various precursor chemicals were also seized. The falsified tablets had been sold across Europe, primarily in Norway. EMCDDA has warned that the manufacture and more frequent use of falsified benzodiazepine tablets, as well as the manufacture of products containing designer benzodiazepines, have become a concern in Europe.

### 3. National legislation, policy and action

812. In a judgment of 19 November 2020, the European Court of Justice stated that CBD extracted from the cannabis plant should not be considered as a drug under the 1961 Convention as amended or the 1971 Convention. The Court stated that, while a literal interpretation of the 1961 Convention as amended might lead to CBD being classified as a drug, insofar as it is a cannabis extract, such an interpretation would be contrary to the general spirit of the Convention and its objective. It also stated that the European Union industrial hemp regulations were not applicable to CBD extracts because CBD was not an agricultural product according to the definitions contained in those regulations. Several European Union member States are adjusting national laws and regulations to align them with that ruling.

813. In December 2020, EMCDDA published a report on low-THC cannabis products in Europe, highlighting the challenges faced by policymakers and suppliers. The report highlighted the complexities that existed due to the lack of a clear regulatory framework governing the issue.

814. On the basis of risk assessments conducted by EMCDDA, in March 2021, the European Commission proposed placing two synthetic cannabinoids (MDMB-4en-PINACA and 4F-MDMB-BICA) under control in the European Union. Health concerns have been raised in Europe about both substances. Once the proposal is adopted, member States will have six months to introduce the relevant national implementing measures.

815. Following its announcement in late 2018 that it would legalize the cultivation, distribution, possession and use of cannabis for recreational purposes within five years, on 22 October 2021, the Government of Luxembourg put forth further legislative proposals. Under the proposed legislation, individuals aged 18 and above would be allowed to grow up to four cannabis plants per household for recreational use. It would also be possible to buy cannabis seeds, without any THC limits, in shops and online. While the consumption and transport of and trade in cannabis or cannabis products other than seeds in public would remain illegal, the consumption and transport of cannabis of up to 3 grams in public would be considered as a misdemeanour instead of a criminal offence.

816. In Switzerland, an amendment to the Federal Act on Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances came into force on 15 May 2021. The amendment specifies the

requirements for pilot projects on the controlled distribution of cannabis for non-medical purposes, with a view to providing a scientific basis for the future regulation of cannabis. Pilot projects are authorized by the Federal Office of Public Health, after consultation with the relevant cantons and municipalities. Pilot projects must be limited in duration to five years and may be extended once, for a period of two years. No more than 5,000 participants in each study are permitted, and the company performing the pilot project must share the results with the Federal Office of Public Health. An evaluation of those research reports is then to be presented to the Federal Assembly of Switzerland. The amendment also allows broader access to cannabis for medical use and specifies that such use will no longer require an exceptional licence from the Federal Office of Public Health. Instead, the treating physician can decide whether to prescribe cannabis. Physicians must collect anonymized data in connection with treatment with cannabis, and the Federal Office of Public Health must keep a register containing the data for statistical purposes and scientific evaluation.

817. A multidisciplinary committee established by the Parliament of France published three reports on cannabis regulation in May 2021. The reports focus on relevant regulations and the impact of three types of cannabis use: (a) medical; (b) recreational; and (c) “wellness” (mainly CBD use). Composed of representatives from six parliamentary commissions and 30 parliamentarians from governing and opposition parties, the committee conducted 100 hearings with experts and professionals in relevant organizations over a period of more than a year. The report on the use of cannabis for medical purposes reviews the experiment conducted in the country, since March 2021, on prescribing cannabis products for therapeutic use, and looks ahead to fully implementing the programme for the development of a new medicinal cannabis sector. The report on recreational use proposes a national debate on key questions that would ensure State control of the trade and the protection of young people. The report on CBD calls for a broad consideration of potential legal aspects and recommends the development of an information, evaluation and regulatory system to ensure consumer safety.

818. In March 2021, the Government of Malta published a white paper on cannabis aimed at strengthening the legal framework on the “responsible use of cannabis”. The main proposals include decriminalizing the possession of up to 7 grams (instead of 3.5 grams) of cannabis and permitting personal cultivation of up to four plants for private consumption. The white paper also contains a proposal for the establishment of a dedicated government

authority responsible for all cannabis-related matters, along with the provision of an educational campaign and training for front-line officials, should those proposals be accepted. The public was invited to submit their views and inputs.

**819. The Board wishes to remind all parties to the 1961 Convention as amended that, under article 4, paragraph (c), thereof, and subject to the provisions of that Convention, the production, manufacture, export, import, distribution of, trade in, use and possession of drugs are limited exclusively to medical and scientific purposes and that any measures allowing for the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes are in violation of the legal obligation incumbent upon parties.**

820. In November 2020, the Government of Denmark published its evaluation of the country's medicinal cannabis pilot programme (January 2018–December 2021). In May 2021, the Parliament of Denmark decided to extend the pilot programme for the prescription of cannabis for medical purposes for another four years. That means that all doctors can continue prescribing cannabis products to their patients for the health conditions they deem appropriate. The Parliament also decided to permanently extend the cultivation and production of medicinal cannabis in Denmark beyond the expiration of the current pilot programme.

821. Ukraine legalized the use of some cannabis products for medical purposes. In April 2021, the Government introduced amendments that allow for the limited use of nabilone and nabiximols. Used to treat the side effects of cancer treatment and to relieve muscle spasms in multiple sclerosis, these drugs are intended to reduce pain for seriously ill patients. Other, draft laws aimed at relaxing cannabis regulations in the country, including permitting the use of cannabis for medical purposes on a prescription basis, establishing a relaxed regulatory system for the cultivation of low-THC cannabis plants and setting out a clear definition of CBD as a non-controlled substance, are expected to be adopted in 2021.

822. Aiming to boost the production and exports of medicinal cannabis, the Parliament of Greece approved a new bill on medicinal cannabis products in 2021. Under the new bill, medicinal cannabis produced by Greek companies for export will be subject only to the laws and regulations of the importing country and will not be subject to the same legal regime as cannabis sold domestically.

823. In Ireland, in July 2021, the Minister for Health announced further developments in the Medical Cannabis

Access Programme (a pilot programme that started in 2019) to increase the availability of cannabis for medical purposes. Medical consultants can now submit applications to register, allowing them to prescribe their patients cannabis products that have been accepted for use in the programme. In December 2020, the country decriminalized possession of cannabis and cannabis resin for personal use: “simple possession” of cannabis or cannabis resin for personal use will not be subject to criminal conviction if the perpetrator admits the offence and accepts an adult caution.

824. In Portugal, regulatory decree No. 2/2020 established the authorization system for the cultivation of “hemp” and its industrial use. Under the terms of the regulatory decree, the agricultural services are responsible for the authorization of the cultivation of “hemp” for industrial purposes, food or animal feed use, the manufacture of compound feeding stuff and the production of fibres and seeds not intended for sowing. The control functions are conducted by the Institute for Financing Agriculture and Fisheries, together with the Judicial Police, the National Republican Guard and the Public Security Police.

825. Several countries in the region approved national drug strategies following the adoption of the European Union Drugs Strategy 2021–2025. In 2020, Bulgaria adopted a new national strategy for combating drugs for the period 2020–2024, which covers five main areas of action (supply reduction; demand reduction; increasing research and modernizing technological equipment; improving inter-agency coordination; and improving the regulatory framework) and contains specific performance indicators for institutions that are intended to contribute to the implementation of the new European Union strategy.

826. In June 2021, Estonia approved the second white paper entitled “Drug policy 2030”, which formulates the country's priority goals for the next 10 years, including a steady downward trend in drug use, the provision of comprehensive assistance and care to users and the integration of drug services and interventions into health, social, educational and law enforcement services.

827. In 2021, Croatia completed the drafting of a new national strategy and action plan to combat addictive behaviour for the period 2021–2030. Taking the latest trends and challenges into consideration, the new strategy focuses on all types of addictive behaviour, in particular, habitual use of psychoactive substances, alcohol, tobacco and drugs. By engaging all relevant stakeholders, the new strategy maps out the actions required to keep the



prevalence of the use of different psychoactive substances within socially acceptable levels while not undermining or jeopardizing public safety.

828. In November 2020, the Russian Federation approved a new anti-drug strategy for the period 2021–2030. The new strategy outlines the security threats posed by narcotic drugs and the increasing use of technology for distributing and selling them, and corresponding actions to suppress the illegal distribution of drugs, protect public health and ensure public security. The goals of the new strategy are to reduce drug trafficking, reduce the consequences of illegal drug use, foment a conscious negative attitude in society towards illegal drug use and involvement in drug trafficking, and improve the availability of and access to controlled substances for medical purposes.

829. In December 2020, the list of controlled precursor chemicals was extended to include an additional 10 precursors following decree No. 2007, which became effective on 4 April 2021.

830. In February 2021, the Government of the Russian Federation approved amendments to article 230 of the Criminal Code establishing criminal responsibility for promoting or inciting the use of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or their analogues over the Internet.

831. In February 2021, the Parliament of Iceland passed into law a bill that will make it legal for municipalities to open supervised injection sites for people who inject drugs. It is estimated that 700 people inject drugs in Iceland and that between 25 and 40 people would initially use the supervised injection sites in Reykjavik.

832. In January 2021, the Government of the United Kingdom announced 148 million pounds worth of new investment to reduce crime and protect people from illegal drugs. Taking a system-wide approach in tackling the problem of illegal drugs in five of the hardest-hit areas in England and Wales, the new investment provides additional funding for law enforcement authorities and drug use treatment and recovery services and is the largest increase in drug use treatment funding in 15 years.

#### 4. Cultivation, production, manufacture and trafficking

833. The illicit drug market in Europe has demonstrated elasticity and adaptability as it rebounded from the short-lived drug supply disruptions during the first wave of COVID-19-related restrictions in the first half of 2020.

Countries reported only marginal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the illicit supply of drugs. On the contrary, by turning to legal freight traffic as the main mode of transport, because it was exempt from the pandemic restrictions, traffickers smuggled more than 100 tons of drugs to Sweden in one year, a far larger amount than previously estimated. Traffickers in France were also prepared for the second lockdown in late 2020 and avoided disruptions to the supply of illicit drugs to the extent experienced in the first lockdown, in early 2020. This was reflected in the greater amount of cannabis and other illicit drugs seized in comparison with the previous reporting period. Among the trends of the second lockdown observed in France was the distribution of drugs at clandestine parties that took place at privately rented venues or in large public spaces. The opposite trend was noted in the Russian Federation, where the tightening of customs controls and limitations on the movement of goods and people led to a 40 per cent decrease in drug-related crimes and a reduction in the availability of cannabis resin in the country during 2020.

834. Eurojust has reported that, despite the slowing frequency of first-time notifications of psychoactive substances, their continuing appearance on the drug market, as well as the use of alternative, non-scheduled precursors, generates a challenging situation for authorities in the region. The difficulty in establishing evidence admissibility and the diverse or even absent legal provisions in different European countries create challenges for law enforcement and legal practitioners in the investigation and prosecution of cases involving these substances. On the basis of an analysis of casework from 2017 to 2020, Eurojust confirmed that law enforcement entities face operational challenges in detecting criminal activity because of the increased use of online marketplaces by traffickers, notably on the darknet, and of cryptocurrency payments and anonymized postboxes for deliveries by clients.

835. EMCDDA has warned that the ongoing digitalization of drug markets to facilitate drug distribution may be one of the longer-term effects of the pandemic. In addition to the encrypted messaging services mentioned above, this can be seen in the increased use of the Internet, including social media and the darknet, to facilitate street-level sales and the supply of drugs. This was coupled with the accelerating exploitation of postal, parcel and home delivery services for the trafficking of drugs. In that regard, Italy reported an upward trend in crimes related to the sale of drugs on the Internet in 2020. Bulgaria also saw an increase in the supply and demand of drugs online, with courier delivery companies increasingly used in the country for the shipment of parcels

containing narcotic substances. Sweden reported that, from 2019 to 2020, the number of Internet-related drug seizures increased by more than 50 per cent, partially due to the country's participation in INTERPOL Operation Pangea, which focuses on tackling counterfeit and illicitly produced medicines sold online.

836. Europol confirms that, while illicit drug sales on the Internet (including the darknet) have accelerated, the Internet is used mainly for the sale and distribution of smaller, retail quantities of drugs, whereas wholesale amounts are trafficked offline. Assessing the threats that serious and organized crime poses to the European Union, Europol states that nearly 40 per cent of the criminal syndicates operating in the European Union are engaged in drug trafficking. As well as generating profits of several billion euros, drug-related crime has been associated with heightened levels of violence in recent years.

837. Large seizures of cocaine in Europe, mostly in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, indicate continuing strong consumer demand for the drug in the region and beyond. As the efficiency of the cocaine supply chain has improved, increased amounts of cocaine of higher purity are reaching the region, according to the UNODC *World Drug Report 2021*. EMCDDA confirms that cocaine potency has been on an upward trajectory over the past decade, increasing by 57 per cent between 2009 and 2019.

838. Maritime trafficking in cocaine, including the exploitation of the transcontinental food trade from South America to Europe, remained largely unaffected by restrictions introduced to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. A shift to trafficking larger consignments of cocaine was observed, with the North Sea coast serving as the primary point of entry for cocaine reaching Europe, as shown by continuing seizures in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, the seizure of 7 tons reported in Antwerp and the seizure of a 16-ton consignment in Hamburg, Germany. Belgium reported cocaine seizures in the port of Antwerp that accounted for a third of the total for all of Europe.

839. Recent seizures of cocaine from South America at ports in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro point to the efforts of traffickers to enter the region by new routes other than through Western and North-Western Europe, notably seaports in South-East Europe. The port of Ploce, Croatia, recorded three seizures of cocaine, including one case involving half a ton of high-purity cocaine concealed in a shipment of bananas from South America, and the port of Durres in Albania reported a seizure of over 300 kg of the substance in June 2021. The seized drugs were intended for onward trafficking by land to neighbouring countries.

Montenegro reported a seizure of over 1,500 kg of cocaine in a warehouse in Podgorica, suspected to have arrived by boat via the port of Bar, in August 2021.

840. Judging by the large maritime seizures of heroin reported, a recent adaptation by traffickers to the situation caused by the pandemic has been the increased use of maritime vessels to traffic opiates, which were traditionally smuggled into the region by land. Sea routes pose less risk and allow for larger quantities to be smuggled. The use of the Balkan route for heroin trafficking from West Asia was impaired by strengthened border control measures. Bulgaria, a transit country along this route, reported that no such land trafficking had been detected on its territory in 2020.

841. There has been greater use of the southern Caucasus route, by which heroin is smuggled by land from the Islamic Republic of Iran through Armenia and Georgia, then by ferry across the Black Sea to Bulgaria and Western Europe. The importance of this route was highlighted by the seizure of nearly 1.5 tons of heroin at the port of Constanța, Romania, in May 2021. Another seizure of the same amount took place in the port city of Rotterdam in February 2021.

842. The Netherlands also reported a seizure of 1 kg of fentanyl, a highly potent opioid. In addition, law enforcement authorities discovered almost 2,000 litres of precursor chemicals (aniline, (2-bromoethyl)benzene, and propionyl chloride) in late October 2020, likely destined for use in the illicit manufacture of fentanyl. It remains unclear whether the manufacture was to take place in the Netherlands or elsewhere. It was the first reported instance of such precursors appearing in the country, and fentanyl manufacture remains uncharacteristic of the region. More detailed analysis of the latest trends and developments related to precursor chemicals under international control, as well as their non-scheduled substitutes and alternatives, can be found in the report of the Board for 2021 on precursors.

843. Trafficking in cannabis and cannabis resin remains persistent in the region, as cannabis remains the most popular drug in the European Union. Illicit cannabis plant cultivation in Europe continued at pre-pandemic levels as trafficking in cannabis resin to Europe shifted from land to sea. Indoor cannabis cultivation remains prevalent in the region, according to UNODC. In addition, EMCDDA reports that home cultivation of cannabis continued in 2020, partially as a result of the pandemic. Morocco remains the main external source of cannabis resin that reaches the European Union, while Albania and North Macedonia continue to be major sources of

significant quantities of high-quality cannabis trafficked to countries of both Central and Western Europe.

844. Spain remains a major point of entry for drugs trafficked from Africa to Europe, as seizures of large amounts of cannabis resin during the reporting period demonstrate. Among the largest of the seizures was one of more than 7 tons of cannabis resin seized at the Spanish coast in May 2021, which had been transported on a tug-boat, and 15 tons of cannabis resin loaded on a vessel sailing from Morocco, which were seized east of Fuerteventura in July 2021.

845. Criminals exploited the growing legitimate market for cannabis products for illicit purposes. A total of 372,000 cannabis plants from 52 plantations, located in different cities in Spain, were seized by the Spanish police in November 2020 after an investigation lasting several months. A business network that was using legitimate CBD oil sales as a front was illicitly cultivating cannabis with a prohibited THC content under the guise of cultivating cannabis for medical purposes.

846. Intelligence obtained from accessing encrypted telephone devices used by criminal networks contributed to the increase in illicit laboratories and drug storage locations discovered in the Netherlands. The number of sites of synthetic drug manufacture reported by the National Police of the Netherlands has continued to rise, to 108 dismantled sites in 2020. Of those, 32 were illicit methamphetamine laboratories in 2020, more than a threefold increase from the previous year. The illicit laboratories are usually very sophisticated, with high-quality and high-output equipment. Europol, in its *Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, warns that large-scale methamphetamine manufacture will likely become more frequent due to the significant profit incentive. In that context, a crystalline methamphetamine laboratory with a daily production capacity of 100 kg was discovered in the Netherlands in July 2021.

847. Bulgaria reported the presence of small laboratories of the so-called “kitchen” type. Such laboratories were found to manufacture methamphetamine for personal use using medicinal products sold over the counter in pharmacies.

848. Although the availability of “ecstasy” appears to have remained unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, in half of the cities assessed by EMCDDA, wastewater analyses showed that “ecstasy” and methamphetamine consumption was below pre-pandemic levels when lockdown measures were in place. To adapt to the possibly different consumer needs during periods of lockdown, an

increasing number of lower-strength “ecstasy” tablets emerged in the Netherlands in 2020, as reported by the country’s drug information and monitoring system.

849. Estonia reported seizing significant amounts of “ecstasy” and cocaine in several individual criminal cases in 2020, but the total amounts of drugs seized in the country did not increase substantially.

850. The European Union early warning system received notifications of a total of 46 NPS in 2020, a considerable decrease from the peak years of 2014 and 2015, when it received notifications of about 100 NPS each year. Opioids and synthetic cannabinoids made up nearly half of the substances for which notifications were received in 2020. Despite growing concerns relating to the use of benzodiazepines, there were no formal notifications of new benzodiazepines in 2020. The decrease in newly detected psychoactive substances is thought to be related to sustained policy efforts by Governments to restrict the availability of such substances on the European market. Nevertheless, EMCDDA warns that the availability and accessibility of such substances remains high, through sales both online and at the street level.

851. The competent authorities of the Russian Federation recorded rapid growth of synthetic drugs in the country, with the number of illicit laboratories dismantled by law enforcement agencies increasing by one fifth and the amount of precursors seized increasing six-fold in 2020 compared with 2019.

## 5. Prevention and treatment

852. Most European countries continue to monitor the drug use situation through the collection, submission and dissemination of comprehensive prevalence and treatment data. With the launch of the latest European Internet survey on drugs by EMCDDA in March 2021, which has been extended to include data collected through the participation of EMCDDA partners in the Western Balkans and the European Neighbourhood Policy countries, more data can be collected in a timely manner. Aimed at improving understanding of patterns of drug use in the region in order to help shape future policies and interventions, the voluntary, anonymous survey will be conducted in 31 countries and in 28 languages.

853. Regional analysis of trends in the consumption of the main opioid analgesics (codeine, dextropropoxyphene, dihydrocodeine, fentanyl, hydrocodone, hydro-morphone, ketobemidone, morphine, oxycodone, pethidine, tilidine and trimeperidine) conducted by INCB

shows that the highest consumption of these drugs is in some developed countries in Europe. Countries reporting some of the highest average consumption of opioids for pain management worldwide in the period 2018–2020 include, in descending order of consumption rates, Germany, Austria and Belgium. The region also continues to be the one with the highest submission rate of consumption data on psychotropic substances to INCB.

854. Approximately 29 per cent of persons in the European Union aged 15–64 (83 million people) are estimated to have used illicit drugs at least once in their lifetime, according to the EMCDDA estimate for the year 2019. Cannabis, with a total of 78.5 million adults reporting lifetime use, remains the most-used drug in the region. The level of lifetime use of cannabis varies considerably within the region, from about 4 per cent in Malta to 45 per cent in France. Much lower estimates are reported for the lifetime use of cocaine (13.9 million), “ecstasy” (10.3 million) and amphetamines (8.6 million). About 17.5 million persons aged 15–34 reported using drugs in the past year, with that number composed of twice as many males as females.

855. According to the EMCDDA *European Drug Report 2021*, patterns of drug use in the region have become more complex as an increasing number of substances become available and the patterns of polydrug use diverge. An emerging trend is the non-medical use of benzodiazepines (at times in combination with opioids or alcohol) among high-risk people who use drugs, prisoners, persons deprived of their liberty and other groups. The easy availability and low cost of the substance, together with the growing prevalence of pandemic-related mental health issues, might have been the main contributing factors. Given such polydrug use and the increasing dominance of synthetic substances in the European Union, EMCDDA has called for further development of forensic and toxicological resources.

856. Another major challenge for Europe is the growing availability of cannabis products adulterated with synthetic cannabinoids and the health risks they pose. Both the number of deaths linked to the use of some synthetic cannabinoids reported in 2020 (over 20 deaths related to 4F-MDMB-BICA in 2020) and public health alerts issued by EMCDDA concerning the presence of natural cannabis products adulterated with highly potent synthetic cannabinoids underline the urgent need for more robust scientific information.

857. The latest report of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs suggests that European students aged 15 and 16 perceived cannabis to

be the illicit substance easiest to obtain, with about one third of respondents rating cannabis as easily obtainable in 2019. More students in Czechia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Slovenia perceived cannabis to be easily available (45–51 per cent). Jurisdictions with the lowest perceived availability of cannabis included North Macedonia, Romania and Ukraine, as well as Kosovo.<sup>60</sup> Perceived availability was lower for “ecstasy” (14 per cent), cocaine (13 per cent), amphetamine (10 per cent) and methamphetamine (8.5 per cent). Those drugs were perceived to be more easily available in Bulgaria, Denmark and Sweden.

858. A 2020 study in Norway examined the relationship between past-year cannabis use and associated factors (such as attitudes towards legalization, use intentions and risk perceptions) and possible dependence among university and college students, and shed light on necessary intervention strategies. Given the relatively common use of cannabis, attitudes towards legalization, the level of intention to use cannabis if legalized and the perception of its low risk, the study suggests that cannabis use poses a tangible health risk for college and university students in the country. Campus-based intervention strategies should therefore target students’ cannabis-related attitudes and risk perceptions, in addition to frequent use.

859. The EMCDDA *European Drug Report 2021*, which contains the latest study of wastewater from 82 cities in 18 European countries, concluded that cannabis use in 2020 was the highest in Southern and Western Europe, in particular in Croatia, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Cocaine use also remained the highest in Southern and Western Europe, with the highest levels being found in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. As in the past, the highest concentrations of amphetamine use were reported in Eastern and Northern Europe. The use of methamphetamine, generally low and historically concentrated in Czechia and Slovakia, was also found in Cyprus, Germany and Spain. The highest levels of “ecstasy” use were found in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Slovenia. While the levels of most drug use were lower during the initial COVID-19-related lockdowns in 2020 in comparison with the data for 2019, the levels went back up once the lockdown measures were lifted. However, the use of drugs such as “ecstasy” that are associated with recreational events was much lower in 2020 in most cities.

860. Similar to the recent trend observed using wastewater analysis, online self-reporting drug use surveys

<sup>60</sup>References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).



suggested a greater popularity of substances perceived as more suitable for home consumption, including psychedelics (for instance, LSD and 2C-B), and dissociatives (for example, ketamine). Preliminary results also suggested that occasional users might have reduced or stopped using drugs during the pandemic, while regular users increased their drug consumption.

861. Prevention and treatment services in most European countries resumed operations by June 2020, although at reduced capacity because of COVID-19 preventive measures. The number of people who use drugs entering treatment remained at lower levels throughout the year, likely because of a greater use of telemedicine. Meanwhile, restrictions on external service providers and social-distancing measures also disrupted treatment services in prison settings.

862. In May 2021, EMCDDA published a technical report entitled “Drug-related deaths and mortality in Europe”, highlighting that an estimated 9,200 deaths had involved one or more illicit drugs in the European Union and Norway and Turkey in 2018. Opioids were the main driver of those fatal overdoses, and men in their thirties and forties accounted for most of those deaths. The number of fentanyl-related deaths decreased markedly in Estonia and Sweden in 2018, while Scotland had some of the highest fentanyl-related mortality rates in Europe. Given that situation, the Government of Scotland introduced Buprenorphine (which contains buprenorphine) as a treatment option for people who use heroin in prisons and across the country and, in July 2021, allocated substantial funding for front-line services in order to get more people into treatment. England and Wales also recorded the largest number of drug-related deaths in 2020 (about 4,500) since 1993. According to the Office for National Statistics, about half of those deaths occurred in 2019 but were recorded in 2020 owing to delays in registering deaths. Apart from that, the increase was possibly driven by an ageing cohort of people who use drugs and the new trends of polydrug use, including combining gabapentinoids and benzodiazepines with heroin or morphine.

863. In the light of the considerable number of people who use opiates and cocaine and of drug-related deaths in the United Kingdom, an independent review was undertaken for the Government. The report (“Review of drugs part two: prevention, treatment, and recovery”) put forth a list of recommendations on treatment and recovery services. Specifically, the report contains a call for a reform in central government leadership, increased funding for drug use treatment and wider recovery support, and the strengthening of local authority accountability.

864. In Ireland, drug use treatment and prevalence data suggest an increasing dominance of cocaine. While opioids continue to be the primary drug of concern and accounted for 37 per cent of drug use treatment cases in 2020, the number of treatment cases involving cocaine increased from 24 per cent in 2019 to 27 per cent in 2020. Cocaine was also, for the first time, the most common drug among new treatment cases in 2020. Findings from the Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey also point to considerable increases in cocaine usage, from 1.8 per cent of males aged 25–34 reporting recent use of cocaine in the period 2002–2003 to 9.4 per cent in the period 2019–2020, considerably higher than that recorded in most other European countries.

865. According to data collected through the French “addictovigilance” system from 2010 to 2019, health harms related to the misuse of gabapentinoids (gabapentin and pregabalin) in France (hospitalization for serious neurological, psychiatric or cardiac effects, requests for support and deaths) were recorded and the intrinsic misuse potential of pregabalin was confirmed. The increasing misuse of gabapentinoids, in particular of pregabalin, in the country since 2018 highlights the importance of specific monitoring of substance use-related disorders even after marketing authorization has been given.

## F. Oceania

Exploitation of Pacific island States for trafficking in drugs to Australia and New Zealand continues and there are indications that the region is also being used to traffic synthetic opioids to the United States and Europe.

Data on the prevalence of drug use and on treatment demand in Pacific island countries remain unavailable. The provision of prevention and treatment services throughout the region needs to be ensured if progress is to be made towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3, on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.

### 1. Major developments

866. Transnational crime, including drug trafficking, continues to increase in the Pacific islands, with small craft being utilized by organized criminal groups for drug trafficking, in particular to Australia and New Zealand. In addition, Pacific island States are emerging as transit