

E. Europe

Most drug-related illicit activities in the region rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, resulting in even greater availability and lower prices for illicit drugs. The potency of illicit drugs has also increased.

Increasingly complex drug consumption patterns, an ageing population and growing economic and mental distress call for closer monitoring and more targeted drug prevention and treatment, especially for vulnerable groups.

The Board is concerned by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and calls for unimpeded access to medications, including those containing internationally controlled substances.

1. Major developments

831. Europe remains an important region for illicit drug manufacture, trafficking and consumption, with most drug-related illicit activities rebounding from temporary changes

caused by mobility restrictions and lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, innovation and adaption to the changing demand in illicit drug markets seem to have resulted in the increased availability of most drugs and lower prices. Drug potency has likewise been increasing.

832. In the European Union, over 350 illicit drug manufacturing sites were dismantled in 2020, according to EMCDDA. Among these were medium- and large-scale laboratories for the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine and sophisticated secondary cocaine-processing laboratories, as well as a growing number of illicit cathinone laboratories and some heroin laboratories.

833. Cocaine trafficking has been increasing each year since 2017; cocaine is mainly trafficked to the region, using maritime shipping containers, from South America to European ports, but trafficking by air seems to have rebounded after being heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The European Union is reportedly becoming a transit region for the smuggling of cocaine onward to countries outside the Union, to Eastern Europe, Oceania and likely Asia, according to EMCDDA.

834. Alongside the increased availability of most drugs, the region continues to exhibit increasingly complex drug consumption patterns, with more drug problems associated with medicinal products, non-controlled new psychoactive substances and substances like ketamine and GHB and GBL in some countries. The spread of cocaine use, in particular use of “crack” cocaine among marginalized populations in some cities and countries, has become a growing concern, as has the use of illicit opioids in combination with benzodiazepines and other polydrug use.

835. The Board notes that, faced with the changes in drug consumption patterns, an ageing population of people who use opioids and the growing economic and mental distress experienced by marginalized groups, authorities need to implement more effective monitoring systems and more targeted drug prevention and treatment programmes to reduce the adverse health and social consequences of drug use. Closer collaboration and better coordination among relevant stakeholders, both domestically and with international partners, has the potential to facilitate experience-sharing and generate greater synergies in addressing these concerns.

836. The conflict in Ukraine may result in changes in how people use drugs and in the drug trafficking situation inside and around the country. The Board has expressed its deep concern at the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and called for unimpeded access to medications, including those containing internationally controlled narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and has reminded Governments of the

possibility of applying simplified control procedures for the export and transportation of such medicines to affected areas during emergency situations. Instability may also have an impact on the drug trafficking situation in terms of both potential illicit drug manufacture trends and changes to trafficking routes. Furthermore, EMCDDA cautions that the conflict in Ukraine may exacerbate substance use due to heightened psychological stress, which persons fleeing the conflict are likely to experience, in the absence of adequate health and support services.

2. Regional cooperation

837. A total of 170 drug control officials from the competent national authorities of 32 countries in Europe (Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine and United Kingdom) have registered to use INCB Learning e-modules. The e-modules support countries in expanding their capacity for the control of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and precursor chemicals and in gaining a deeper understanding of the international drug control framework.

838. In January 2022, the Croatian Police and the Drug Enforcement Administration of the United States signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance cooperation between the two countries to combat transnational drug trafficking. The memorandum includes provisions concerning technological and information exchange, collaboration on operations targeting drug trafficking and close communication in the prosecution of perpetrators of drug-related offences.

839. In January 2022, the European Commission proposed to strengthen the mandate of EMCDDA, which, if the proposal is adopted, would become the European Union Drugs Agency. The proposed reform would allow the body to improve its monitoring capacities, issue alerts on newly emerging and dangerous substances, develop threat assessments in relation to illicit drugs, establish a network of forensic and toxicological laboratories to enhance information exchange, and develop information and awareness-raising campaigns across the European Union.

840. In March 2022, the INCB GRIDS Programme convened a case meeting in Madrid with 20 investigators from the Spanish National Police, Spanish counter-terrorism authorities, Spanish customs authorities, the United Kingdom National Crime Agency, the United States Drug Enforcement

Administration, the United States Customs and Border Protection agency and the United States Postal Inspection Service to take coordinated actions on a global new psychoactive substance trafficking organization identified by the OPIOIDS project via IONICS communications.

841. The GRIDS Programme convened the first global conference for operational officers on the interdiction of fentanyl, synthetic opioids and related dangerous substances, held in Vienna from 1 to 5 August 2022. The event brought together over 140 participants from around the world, including 22 participants from Austria, Belgium, Czechia, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Serbia, Spain, the United Kingdom, UNODC, UPU and WCO, which engaged in practical awareness-raising and capacity-building related to synthetic opioids.

842. The GRIDS Programme convened the fifth annual operational meeting on countering trafficking of dangerous synthetic drugs and chemicals through postal, courier, and air cargo services, held in Vienna from 6 to 9 September 2022. The event brought together nearly 60 officers from 30 Governments and international organizations, including 21 participants from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, UNODC, UPU and WCO. Participating countries also conducted bilateral and multilateral meetings to enhance cooperation across borders, facilitated by INCB.

843. The GRIDS Programme hosted the interregional workshop on public-private partnerships for the prevention of the trafficking of dangerous substances, held in Sharm el-Sheikh from 11 to 14 September 2022. The event was attended by more than 120 representatives from 30 Governments, 5 international organizations and 15 Internet-related service providers and their associations, including 7 participants from Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Participants exchanged best practices and case examples related to the exploitation of private sector agencies and online platforms for the trafficking of dangerous substances with the aim of strengthening international operational cooperation across borders to prevent future misuse of legitimate Internet-related services.

844. In June 2022, the authorities of Italy and Montenegro discussed new ways to strengthen and cooperate in their law enforcement activities to prevent drug smuggling. The areas of cooperation will include capacity-building of the police forces of Montenegro and, as part of a European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) mission, the use of Italian helicopters and aircraft to carry out monitoring activities in the coastal area of Montenegro and the Adriatic Sea.

845. In July 2022, EMCDDA signed an agreement to become a partner of the COPOLAD III, which seeks to strengthen cooperation on drug policy between the European Union and countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. The contributions of EMCDDA to the programme will target capacity- and institution-building of national drug observatories, cooperation on drug trafficking investigations, and support for drug demand reduction policies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

846. A joint statement was issued by the Governments of Germany, Luxembourg and Malta in July 2022 at the first high-level consultation on the regulation of cannabis for non-medical and non-scientific uses. It expressed the support of those Governments for new approaches concerning policies on cannabis and called for special attention to the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes and its possession in small quantities for personal use, including through a review of regulations and policies and a continuing multi-lateral dialogue.

847. In 2022, Europol coordinated parallel investigations involving law enforcement agencies from various countries (Belgium, Brazil, Germany, the Netherlands, Paraguay, Spain and the United States), which resulted in the dismantling of a criminal organization responsible for trafficking multi-ton shipments of cocaine to Europe. The investigation found that the criminal group trafficked shipments of cocaine from Latin America to Europe every few months, with distribution networks based in Spain. The criminal group was also found to have coordinated its illicit activities through encrypted communications platforms, including the messaging application Sky ECC, which was dismantled in 2021.

3. National legislation, policy and action

848. In December 2021, the European Council adopted reforms of the common agricultural policy, which stipulated that European Union subsidies would be available for farmers cultivating hemp varieties with a THC content of less than 0.3 per cent. The new common agricultural policy will be in effect from 1 January 2023 until the end of 2027.

849. In June 2022, amendments to the Europol Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/794) entered into force, strengthening the capacity of Europol to support European Union member States in tackling organized crime and terrorism. The amendments enhance the legal basis for processing large and complex data sets, introduce changes to how personal data can be handled by Europol, allow the organization to receive data from private parties for the purposes of criminal

investigations and have increased focus on new technologies and innovation.

850. Following the risk assessments conducted by EMCDDA in November 2021, the European Commission adopted measures to control two new psychoactive substances, 3-methyl-*N*-methylcathinone (3-MMC) and 3-chloromethylcathinone (3-CMC), on 18 March 2022. All European Union member States have six months to reflect those changes in their national implementing legislation. The legislation entered into force on 18 August 2022.

851. The new European Union Regulation (EU) 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products, together with related implementing acts and delegated acts, entered into force on 28 January 2022. Aiming to safeguard animal health and reduce administrative burdens for both marketing authorization holders and the authorities, the new legislation encourages innovation enabling more new products to come onto the market and the availability of medicines for veterinary use, including those that contain controlled substances, will be increased.

852. The Government of Luxembourg announced further details of its planned “recreational cannabis” project in June 2022. Individuals aged 18 or older are to be allowed to grow up to four cannabis plants from seeds, per household, for private non-medical use. Outdoor cultivation will be allowed but the plants must not be visible to anyone passing on public roads. It would also be possible to acquire cannabis seeds, with no limits imposed on THC content, in stores in Luxembourg, imported from abroad or purchased online. The Government plans to maintain the ban on cannabis use in public. Criminal proceedings will apply, in case of non-compliance with the place of cultivation, or when the limit on the number of plants grown at home is exceeded. The consumption, possession, acquisition or transport in public of up to three grams of cannabis will be considered a misdemeanour instead of a criminal offence.

853. Following its publication of a white paper on cannabis aimed at strengthening the legal framework on the “responsible use of cannabis” in 2021, the Government of Malta passed the Responsible Use of Cannabis Act (Act No. LXVI) on 18 December 2021. The Act establishes the national authority which will regulate the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes and implement related harm reduction measures to reduce the adverse health and social consequences of drug use in the country. Under the new law, personal cultivation of up to four plants per household for private consumption is to be permitted. Possession of cannabis not exceeding 7 grams for personal use will not constitute an offence. Possession of 7 to 28 grams for personal use, irrespective of purity, will be liable to a penalty of 50 to 100 euros.

854. Following the enactment of the Controlled Cannabis Supply Chain Experiment Act in July 2020, the Government of the Netherlands continued with the preparatory phase of its experimental cannabis programme. Under the experiment, a maximum of 10 growers will produce cannabis, and those who have been selected must set up their businesses in accordance with the Experiment Act and related regulations. The next phase of the experiment, which will last six weeks to allow participating coffee shops to transition their businesses, is expected to start in 2023.

855. The Board reminds all parties to the 1961 Convention as amended that, under article 4, paragraph (c), of the Convention, and subject to the provisions of the Convention, the production, manufacture, export, import and distribution of, trade in, and 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 to the Convention.

856. In order to facilitate access to cannabis for medical use, the Government of Switzerland lifted the ban on cannabis for such use as of 1 August 2022. Patients who are medically prescribed cannabis no longer need to seek exceptional permission from the Federal Office of Public Health. The legislative change also means that the cultivation, processing, manufacture and trade of cannabis for medical use will be under the authority of Swissmedic, the governmental agency for drugs and medical products.

857. In December 2021, the Government of the United Kingdom adopted a new long-term drug strategy entitled “From harm to hope: a 10-year drugs plan to cut crime and save lives”. The plan will involve both national and local partners on three strategic priorities: (a) break drug supply chains, (b) deliver a world-class treatment and recovery system, and (c) achieve a generational shift in demand for drugs. The strategy is underpinned by a record investment of over 3 billion pounds (\$3.6 billion) in the next 3 years.

858. In January 2021, the Minister of State for Public Health, Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy of Ireland announced 850,000 euros (roughly \$850,000) in recurring funding for an initiative to reduce the health-related harms associated with the use of cocaine and “crack” cocaine. The funding will support the development and implementation of better treatment for cocaine use, a training programme for addiction service staff and targeted interventions in disadvantaged communities affected by consumption.

859. In the Russian Federation, the narcotic drug etorphine, a semi-synthetic opioid for veterinary use, was transferred from the list of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors prohibited from circulation in the country (list I) to the list of drugs and substances whose trade is limited (list II) in early 2022, thus broadening access to the substance.

860. In March 2022, the Government of Sweden adopted a new strategy for alcohol, drugs, doping, tobacco and gambling for the period 2022–2025. The new strategy included measures related to controlled medicinal products and strengthened drug prevention, including crime prevention and law enforcement efforts. Availability of syringe exchange programmes in the country is expected to grow following the decision of Parliament to remove, as of 1 August 2022, the residency requirement for a person’s participation in such programmes.

4. Cultivation, production, manufacture and trafficking

861. *The European Drug Report 2022* published by EMCDDA, based on information provided to the agency by the European Union member States, Türkiye and Norway, finds that drug availability remained high and the illicit drug markets rebounded from the temporary changes associated with mobility restrictions and lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, cocaine availability has increased compared with pre-pandemic levels. The cocaine price in the European Union has also become more affordable, dropping by 40 per cent between 2015 and 2020. Potency and purity levels have seen an increasing trend; in the case of cocaine, purity increased by 40 per cent between 2010 and 2020. The average THC content of both cannabis resin and herbal cannabis has seen a similar upward trend. Unlike in the past, when the THC content of herbal cannabis was higher than that of resin, the THC content of cannabis resin is now reported to be nearly twice as high as that of herbal cannabis.

862. The European Union remains an important region for illicit drug manufacture. EMCDDA notes that over 350 illicit drug manufacturing facilities were dismantled in the European Union in 2020. The agency highlighted the increasing number of sophisticated secondary cocaine-processing laboratories that have been dismantled by the authorities of Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. Latin American and European criminal groups are believed to be operating these clandestine cocaine laboratories. Although the illicit manufacture of synthetic cathinones has been limited in the region, EMCDDA cautions that, based on the number of dismantled illicit laboratories and the amount of

precursors seized since 2020, illicit manufacture of this drug group may be increasing. As concerns clandestine heroin laboratories, four sites were dismantled in the European Union in 2020, specifically in Belgium and Czechia.

863. Illicit methamphetamine manufacture has become more sophisticated and large-scale in Europe, affecting global supply and regional consumption. Illicit laboratories using different manufacturing methods that are capable of manufacturing large amounts of methamphetamine continue to be discovered in Belgium and the Netherlands. A total of 35 medium- and large-scale laboratories were dismantled in 2020 according to EMCDDA. This is a departure from traditional, small-scale “kitchen-type” laboratories found in Czechia and neighbouring countries, which relied on precursors diverted from controlled medicines. The region is now becoming more important both for the global supply of the drug, which is then trafficked outside the region, as well as for consumption inside the European Union, with more European Union member States reporting the Netherlands as the source of seized methamphetamine. As occurs with illicit cocaine-processing laboratories, Latin American and European criminal operators often collaborate in operating illicit methamphetamine manufacturing sites in Europe.

864. Europe continues to be an important transit and destination region for different drug classes. Commercial infrastructure and intermodal container shipments are frequently exploited for drug smuggling.

865. A trend analysis of seizures based on EMCDDA data shows that between 2010 and 2020, methamphetamine and amphetamine had the largest percentage increase of seizures in the European Union, increasing nearly fivefold and fourfold, respectively. This was followed by seizures of cannabis herb, which nearly tripled, whereas seizures of cocaine and MDMA in the European Union doubled.

866. Cocaine trafficking has been increasing year-on-year since 2017, with cocaine mainly being trafficked using maritime shipping containers sent from South America to Europe through ports in Belgium and the Netherlands, although seizures have also been reported in other European ports. Apart from trafficking by sea, smuggling to Europe by air seems to have rebounded after a sharp decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions affecting commercial air travel. According to EMCDDA, the use of private business aircraft to traffic cocaine directly from South America and the Caribbean to western Europe is expected to increase in the future. According to UNODC, large amounts of cocaine are now also found to be trafficked from South America to Europe through West and North Africa. Another trend reported by EMCDDA and Europol is that the

European Union is used as a transit point for smuggling cocaine to countries outside the Union, namely to Eastern Europe, Oceania and likely Asia.

867. The illicit market for “crack” cocaine is growing and expanding beyond Western Europe, according to EMCDDA and Europol. This is believed to be due to increased accessibility and the different methods for sourcing the product, including through the Internet as well as encrypted communications tools.

868. The Balkan route, which goes from Afghanistan, through the Islamic Republic of Iran, Türkiye and the Balkan countries to Central and Western Europe remains the most significant trafficking route for heroin. However, although half of worldwide seizures of heroin and morphine are effected along this route, seizures in 2020 decreased in the Balkan countries and countries of Western and Central Europe.¹⁶⁴ In this regard, Bulgaria noted the increasing trend of using maritime containers for heroin trafficking in 2021, whereas until then heroin was exclusively trafficked by land. The established heroin trafficking routes to Europe may also be being exploited for smuggling of methamphetamine to the region.

869. Cannabis was the most frequently seized drug, with European Union member States seizing 2.8 million cannabis plants in 2020. According to EMCDDA, a new trend is that cannabis illicitly produced within the region constitutes a more prominent source for the European market. For cannabis sourced outside the region, Spain is the main entry point for the rest of Western and Central Europe.¹⁶⁵ Elaborate trafficking methods were noted when, at the end of 2021, Spanish authorities seized 2.4 tons of cannabis resin and 112 kg of cannabis, and dismantled the criminal network responsible for smuggling the cannabis and cannabis resin from Morocco to Spain on modified helicopters, then smuggled by truck to France.

870. In July 2022, the Spanish National Police also dismantled two large-scale illicit laboratories for processing cannabis resin in the province of Barcelona, the first time such laboratories were found. Also in July 2022, another investigation resulted in the seizure of over 5 tons of cannabis resin and the dismantling of a trafficking organization with arrests in the provinces of Cádiz, Ciudad Real, Huelva, Málaga and Sevilla. The cannabis resin was hidden in cargoes of fish and fruit transported in trucks and was destined for other European countries. According to the Spanish police, the criminal group also used technology to obstruct radio signals to hinder any possible police investigation.

¹⁶⁴ *World Drug Report 2022*, booklet 3, p. 89.

¹⁶⁵ *World Drug Report 2022*, booklet 3, p. 21.

871. There is some evidence that the expanding market for cannabis products for medical and industrial purposes is being used for illicit purposes, as another incident in Spain demonstrated, when, in July 2022, 6 tons of cannabis plants and 3.5 tons of cannabis buds were seized. The plantation did not have appropriate permits for licit cultivation, but logos of various Spanish authorities, as well as signs declaring “industrial hemp cultivation” had been posted on the premises to make the plantation appear legal. An advanced security system of over 100 video cameras had been placed in the plantation allowing non-stop surveillance of the plantation by the criminals responsible.

872. More European Union countries are detecting cannabis adulterated with synthetic cannabinoids in seized samples. According to EMCDDA, the most frequently detected synthetic cannabinoid reported in 2021 was ADB-BUTINACA. The agency notes that eight European Union member States have detected such adulterated samples since mid-2020 but that the identification of synthetic cannabinoids in cannabis samples remains difficult because their detection requires more complex forensic analysis.

873. The *European Drug Report 2022*, furthermore, warns that on average one new psychoactive substance is identified every week. The European Union warning system issued notifications for 52 new drugs in 2021, bringing to 880 the total number of new psychoactive substances detected in Europe and monitored by EMCDDA. This is nevertheless a considerable decrease from the peak years of 2014 and 2015, when some 100 new psychoactive substances were identified each year.¹⁶⁶ Those newly notified substances include six new synthetic opioids, six new synthetic cathinones and 15 new synthetic cannabinoids. Of particular concern is the rising availability of synthetic cathinones, currently the second largest category of psychoactive substances monitored by the European Union warning system, after synthetic cannabinoids. UNODC warns that Eastern Europe is particularly affected by the proliferation of new psychoactive substances, suggesting that this may be due to an increased online supply, especially with regard to cathinones.

874. Bulgaria reported that new psychoactive substances continued to enter the country in postal and express courier shipments. A total of 8.5 kg of 10 different new psychoactive substances, mostly belonging to the group of synthetic cannabinoids, were seized in 16 cases during the reporting period.

875. The digitalization of drug markets used to facilitate drug distribution has become a well-known, long-term challenge for law enforcement entities. In this regard, and as

previously reported by INCB, the use of the Internet (clear web), including social media, to facilitate street-level sales and supply of drugs, continues to grow. However, the use of the darknet for illicit drug purposes may have slowed. EMCDDA analysis found that estimated darknet revenues sharply declined from 2020 to 2021, falling from approximately 1 million euros per day (roughly \$1 million) to less than 30,000 euros (roughly \$30,000). This may be due to increased law enforcement activity and decreased consumer confidence. UNODC points out that darknet sites are temporary in nature and disappear regularly. The decline in sales may also be due to the emergence of new darknet markets that are not yet effectively monitored.¹⁶⁷

5. Prevention and treatment

876. Most European countries have robust monitoring capabilities for the timely collection and dissemination of prevalence and treatment data. Although such systems were still in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the disruptions to prevention and treatment services during the lockdown periods, recent data should be interpreted with caution. For instance, treatment data on clients entering specialized drug treatment facilities were more affected by the pandemic than were other epidemiological indicators. On the other hand, the rapid introduction of telemedicine and innovative treatment approaches, while continuing to satisfy treatment demand during the lockdown periods, might not be captured and reflected in pre-pandemic indicator data.

877. Bearing in mind these caveats, data gathered by EMCDDA show that the total number of first-time treatment entrants in the region dropped by 14 per cent in 2020 compared with the previous year. Adversely, the latest preliminary national treatment data point towards increases in 2021 (compared with 2020), reflecting the return of services to pre-pandemic levels.

878. According to the *World Drug Report 2022*, cannabis remains the most widely used substance in Europe, followed by cocaine, opioids and “ecstasy”. Notable differences, however, were registered between Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and Western and Central Europe. Opioids and opiates were much more widely used in Eastern and Central Europe; cocaine and “ecstasy” were used more in Western and Central Europe.

879. According to the *European Drug Report 2022*, about 29 per cent of adults (ages 15–64) in the European Union (83.4 million people) are estimated to have used an illicit

¹⁶⁶E/INCB/2021/1, chap. III.

¹⁶⁷*World Drug Report 2022*, booklet 2, p. 60.

drug in their lifetime, with more males (50.5 million) than females. Cannabis remains the most widely used substance, with over 22 million (7.7 per cent of adults) reporting its use in the past year. National estimates for the use of cannabis in the past year, however, exhibit considerable disparity and range from 3.4 per cent to 22.9 per cent. An estimated 3.5 million (1.2 per cent of adults) reported using cocaine in the past year, 2.6 million (0.9 per cent of adults) used MDMA, and 2 million (0.7 per cent of adults) amphetamines. Approximately 1 million adults are estimated to have used heroin or another illicit opioid.

880. Cannabis remains the most used drug among young adults (ages 15–34) in the region, with 15.8 million (15.5 per cent of young adults) reporting its use in the past year, which is a much higher percentage than for other substances (2.2 per cent for cocaine, 1.9 per cent for MDMA and 1.4 per cent for amphetamines).

881. Treatment demand for cannabis-related problems is more requested than for any other type of drug. Cannabis was the drug most frequently cited by new treatment clients and accounted for 45 per cent of all first-time treatment entrants in 2020, as noted by EMCDDA. Data from 25 countries indicate that some 80,000 people entered specialized drug treatment for cannabis use, with more than half (43,000) entering treatment for the first time.

882. The use of cocaine, in particular the spread of “crack” cocaine among vulnerable populations, is a major concern in Southern and Western Europe. Recent data from wastewater analysis conducted by EMCDDA suggest that cocaine use in Europe has returned to its pre-pandemic levels. Approximately 15 per cent of all first-time drug treatment requests in 2020 were related to cocaine, alongside the growing use of “crack” cocaine by marginalized groups in more cities and countries. EMCDDA notes that about 7,000 clients received drug treatment for “crack” cocaine in 2020, three times the number in 2016, with Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain reporting considerable increases in treatment cases. Further, a rising trend in use of “crack” cocaine has been reported in France and Germany. The latest data of municipal wastewater analysis in 13 European cities found “crack” cocaine residues in all cities, with the highest amounts in Amsterdam and Antwerp. In Ireland, a report investigating the scope of substance misuse in Tallaght (the largest satellite town of Dublin), concluded that the town had some of the highest rates of substance misuse in 2020; cocaine was reported as the second most used drug, and the number of referrals to services for cocaine use increased by 18 per cent from 2019 to 2020 in the town.

883. Often associated with various health and social problems, the spread of cocaine and “crack” cocaine use calls for

closer monitoring of the situation and more targeted interventions. People who use “crack” cocaine who have made it soluble for injection face higher risks of HIV and hepatitis C virus infection and are more exposed to criminal prosecution as a consequence of violent behaviour and mental health problems, which are often linked to high-frequency consumption of the substance. Greater investment in specialist service responses is therefore required for those experiencing health problems related to “crack” cocaine use, along with measures targeting violence and societal problems related to “crack” cocaine.

884. EMCDDA also notes an increasing complexity in drug consumption patterns within the region, with more drug problems associated with medicinal products, non-controlled new psychoactive substances and substances such as ketamine and GHB and GBL in some countries. The use of opioids, often in combination with other substances, constitutes the greatest share of harm caused by illicit drug use.

885. With an estimated 5,800 overdose deaths involving illicit drugs in 2020, the European Union had an estimated rate of mortality due to drug overdose of 17.4 deaths per million for the adult population. Opioids are present in about three quarters of these deaths, with Austria and Norway reporting an increase in the number of heroin- and morphine-related deaths in 2020. Benzodiazepines are also commonly found in toxicological reports on drug-related deaths, although it is unclear if they were prescribed for therapeutic purposes. Given the considerable increase in the number of overdose deaths in the 50–64 age group (82 per cent increase between 2012 and 2020), greater efforts are required to understand opioid use in that age group and cater to the needs of those with chronic drug and health problems.

886. To reduce the number of deaths due to opioids, the Government of Sweden has commissioned the National Board of Health and Welfare to propose, develop and implement initiatives supporting increased availability of naloxone. In conjunction, the Swedish Medical Products Agency is also leading an ongoing investigation into the possibility of classifying naloxone for over-the-counter availability.

887. Owing to the associated health problems caused by injecting drug use, the relatively limited information available on the latest patterns remain an area of concern, despite the declining trend of injecting drug use in the region over the past decade. Although heroin has long been associated with injecting use in many countries, the latest treatment data indicate that only 22 per cent of first-time clients with heroin as their primary drug reported injecting as their main route of administration, down from 35 per cent in 2013. However, little information is available regarding the patterns of other

drugs being injected, and hence the harm associated with such behaviour. Closer monitoring of the trend in injecting drug use and earlier diagnosis of blood-borne infections, if any, remain an important focus for intervention.

888. Following the disruption of nightlife activity since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of MDMA use in Europe continued to drop in 2020, as evidenced by the considerable reduction in the number of MDMA-related emergency hospital visits. MDMA use in 2021 seemed lower than its pre-pandemic levels, although it remains to be seen whether its use will rise again as countries lift COVID-19 restrictions.

889. Most countries reported the increased use of online platforms for drug treatment and harm reduction services to reduce the adverse health and social consequences of drug use during the pandemic and since then have opted for greater use of telemedicine, appointment-only visits and online outreach and education webinars. Some difficulties in delivering such treatment services were observed, including the need for clients to access digital services as well as reaching out to first-time clients. The long-term effectiveness of online drug treatment and harm reduction services requires further monitoring and evaluation.

890. Since treatment service is a major component of the United Kingdom drug strategy “From harm to hope: a 10-year drugs plan to cut crime and save lives”, additional funding of 15.5 million pounds (\$18.75 million) has been pledged to local councils responsible for commissioning drug and alcohol treatment and recovery services for the period 2022–2023. A corresponding strategy for those working in drug treatment services is being prepared by Health Education England in order to strengthen and complement the implementation of the 10-year plan.

891. In Sweden, the Institute for Health and Medical Care Economics estimated that drug use cost the society of Sweden a total of 38.5 million kronor (\$3.41 million) in 2020. The figure includes the direct, indirect and intangible costs of drug use. In June 2021, the National Board of Health and Welfare published a study about young people who commit drug crimes, the penalties they receive, subsequent care and support provided by the social services. In June 2022, another report focusing on drug-related mortality for different drug types and different population groups, based on 2019 data, was also published.

892. In Croatia, the latest treatment data suggest that about one third of those receiving drug treatment are women, who often face specific challenges including the absence of primary family support, scarce social networks, higher unemployment and lack of housing. Since 2021, a

greater focus has thus been placed on developing treatment services for women with drug use problems and strengthening cooperation among government agencies in the delivery of those services. Meanwhile, a multisectoral commission has also been established to evaluate the effectiveness of various psychosocial rehabilitation and social reintegration programmes, including programmes for women with drug use problems.

893. Iceland experienced a considerable drop in smoking, drinking and drug use among its teenagers through State-funded initiatives that promote healthier alternatives including sports, family-orientated activities and cultural provisions. At the Planet Youth Annual Conference 2022, held in Reykjavik in September 2022, experts were invited to discuss the substance use prevention based on the Icelandic prevention model.