

On Drugs: Europe's Cities Pushing for Reform

Article by Carrie Hamilton

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Though the “war on drugs” has achieved nothing but violence and environmental degradation, green and progressive voices calling for evidence-based decriminalisation and legal regulation are struggling to take root in mainstream political discourse. As national politics in Europe turns right, a fresh push for change is coming from the cities.

Earlier this year, the Green Mayor of Amsterdam Femke Halsema hit the headlines when she called for the legal regulation of cocaine. While Halsema's appeal may sound wild in a world where the “war on drugs” is being waged as fervently as ever, her voice is part of a growing international movement for reform – and Greens across Europe are among those leading the way.

The mayor's announcement came just ahead of the conference Dealing with Drugs: Cities and the quest for regulation. Organised by the City of Amsterdam, the conference brought together city leaders, policy experts, and people who use drugs to explore potential routes to legal regulation, under which governments would control the production, availability, and use of drugs – much in the way alcohol is currently regulated throughout most of the world.

Legal regulation would mark a radical departure from the existing global regime of drug prohibition. Enshrined in international law through a series of United Nations conventions and protocols dating to the 1960s, and boosted by the American call for an international war on drugs in the early 1970s, prohibition criminalises every stage of the drug trade: from cultivation and manufacturing to trafficking, possession, and use.

War without winners

Even on its own terms – eliminating production, trade, and use – the war on drugs has been a resounding failure. Moreover, it has been fought at enormous economic, human and environmental cost. According to the 2016 Alternative World Drug Report, prohibition costs at least 100 billion US dollars per year to enforce, while creating an enormously profitable underground drug market that enriches criminal organisations and undermines economies in countries such as Mexico. Both the illegal drug trade and its policing involve widespread human rights abuses, including murder, mass incarceration, and capital punishment. Finally, activities linked to both the illegal drug market and prohibition – including cultivation, attempts to eradicate crops, and the laundering of drug profits – have been blamed for dangerous levels of deforestation and pollution, from South Africa to South America.

Yet governing bodies throughout the world continue to pledge support and funding to the elusive aim of eradicating the global drug trade. The European Union is a case in point. The stated objective of the EU Council's Horizontal Working Party on Drugs, established in 1997, is to reduce the supply and demand for drugs, a goal reiterated in the most recent EU Drugs Strategy (2021-25), which prioritises the dismantling of criminal organisations.

However, the EU's main research body on drugs, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug

Addiction (EMCDDA), concluded in its [2023 report](#) that the availability of “the commonly used illicit drugs in the European Union remains high”. At the same time, control of this market is still in the hands of organised crime. As Mayor Halsema stated [at the Amsterdam conference](#), “What we can see worldwide, in Europe and in the Netherlands, [is that] there’s more violence, there are more drugs on the market, our economy is getting infected, the justice system is overloaded. We need a change. We can’t go on as we have for the last 50 years.”

Halsema chose to focus on cocaine because that’s where the main challenge lies for her city. According to Ruben Boomsma of the international network of law enforcement officials LEAP, which advocates for evidence-based drug policy, the trafficking of cocaine via the main ports in the Netherlands, such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam, means that the activities of criminal organisations are having an increased impact on those cities.

Regulating soft drugs

Elsewhere in Europe, most Greens and other politicians interested in drug law reform are focussing their efforts on cannabis and other so-called “soft drugs”. Halsema’s own party, the GroenLinks, ran for the November 2023 Dutch elections together with the Labour Party (PvdA). The alliance’s [joint drug policy](#) mentions the legalisation of soft drugs with evidence of low risk (cannabis, mushrooms, and MDMA). According to the alliance’s spokesperson on drugs, legislative member Songül Mutluer (PvdA), the policy prioritises health and safety while allowing the parties to “keep an eye on the reality of organised crime and the increasing explosions in our neighbourhoods related to drug criminality”, which poses a particular danger to young people.

While limiting itself to soft drugs, the Green-Labour position goes further than the existing “[toleration system in the Netherlands](#)”, which prohibits drug possession while allowing cannabis to be consumed in the country’s famous coffee houses. While the Netherlands was ahead of the game with its permissive approach to cannabis consumption, in recent years other European countries have gone further. Both Malta and Luxembourg have legalised the cultivation and possession of cannabis for personal use, and Germany – where Greens are part of the coalition government – [followed](#) at the beginning of April 2024. Germany’s new cannabis law also allows for the establishment of not-for-profit associations to cultivate and supply cannabis to members, and opens the way for people with previous convictions for cannabis possession to request the removal of those records.

The move to legalise cannabis is part of a global shift since the turn of the millennium. Other countries and regions – for example, Canada and some American states – have adopted policies of legal regulation. Motivated in part by the desire to take the cannabis market out of criminal hands, the case for legalisation has also been driven by scientific evidence demonstrating the plant’s medicinal benefits.

At its congress in Vienna last year, the European Green Party passed a [resolution](#) supporting a “Green and science-based approach to cannabis law in Europe”, with the goal of giving “a new approach to a cannabis law that ends the negative impacts of prohibition”. Presented by the Polish, German and Luxembourg parties, the motion was adopted with a visible majority. Only the Swedish delegation expressed its reservation against the motion.

At the same time, some Green MEPs are taking part in informal discussions about cannabis reform. Mikuláš Peksa, a Czech MEP from the Pirate Party, which sits with the Greens in the European Parliament, welcomes this “cross-partisan group ...that allows us to promote cannabis-related policies”.

Pioneers of decriminalisation

The Czech Republic is one of a small number of European countries to take an evidence-based, public-health approach to drug use beyond cannabis. Since 1990, the country has decriminalised the possession of drugs for personal use and supports a range of harm-reduction measures for people who use drugs.

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But the country most famous for decriminalisation is Portugal. In 2001, Jorge Sampaio's socialist government implemented a series of policies aimed at prioritising public health and harm reduction. The possession of small quantities of drugs for personal use was decriminalised and replaced with a system of fines and offers of treatment, meaning that people with problematic drug use could get the support they needed rather than crowding the country's prisons. In addition, harm-reduction measures were put into place, such as needle exchanges and safe consumption rooms (where people can use drugs in a safe space with clean equipment and medical staff on hand). The result was a dramatic drop in HIV infection rates among people who inject drugs, as well as a reduction in drug-related deaths and overall drug use, with rates lower than the EU average.

"We had a terrible situation back in the late 1990s," recalls Henrique Vasconcelos, a medical doctor and member of the General Assembly of the Portuguese Green party LIVRE, with reference to drug-related deaths. "The decriminalisation act of 2001 changed things radically. Of course it's not perfect, it's not the silver bullet that will end any drug-related issue. But it did a lot of good and it's still doing a lot of good," he adds.

LIVRE promotes a public health-based approach to drugs, grounded in science and an understanding of problematic drug use as a social and economic, rather than criminal, problem. Vasconcelos, who helped to write the party's health policy, says that "We see drug abuse and drug dependence as part of an intersectional range of issues that is not exclusively about drugs themselves, with chemical or medical issues of addiction, but rather a myriad of issues, such as the housing crisis, atomisation of society, low salaries. All the usual culprits."

Fighting stigma in England and Wales

Harm reduction, a commitment to evidence-based policy and public health, and support for marginalised communities are the values that unite different Green parties across Europe. Alex Armitage, another doctor and currently a Green councillor on the Shetland Islands in Scotland, explains how his own commitment to these values prompted him to initiate a radical reform of the drug policy of the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) a few years ago.

In 2018, Armitage was living on a council estate in Hackney, East London, and running to be a local councillor. He recalls knocking on hundreds of doors as part of his campaign, and hearing story after story about "how drug prohibition has ruined people's lives" – from the violence of local organised gangs to police harassing and arresting local youth. "[I heard about] young Black men who'd had a minor

conviction and their life was ruined, just because of this tiny amount of cannabis they happened to be carrying. [I saw] the injustice and how harm is inflicted on communities. And it's all down to the government policy of prohibition. As a doctor, I learned that the first law of medical ethics is do no harm. If you take that ethic into politics, the first thing you would do is end prohibition," he says.

In 2019, the GPEW passed its new policy, proposing the full legal regulation of all drugs, based on a system that takes into account up-to-date scientific evidence on the levels of risk posed by different substances. Armitage explains why, unlike most Green parties in Europe, the GPEW Drug Policy Working Group decided to go beyond cannabis and other soft drugs: "The conversation seemed to be focused on cannabis and I thought we needed to move it on to talk about heroin and crack and stimulants, and talk about economics, about criminal justice, about millions of people in producer and transfer countries, all of the global production and ecological destruction and murder and disenfranchisement of communities in the Andes, that all come about as a result of our decision to have an illegal drugs market."

The full picture

This holistic approach to drug reform as a social justice issue echoes the demands of those too often left out of the conversation: people who use drugs, and especially those who use the most stigmatised substances, including opioids. In the words of Judy Chang of the International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD), who also attended the Amsterdam Conference: "We have this drug exceptionalism: cannabis is OK, cocaine is OK. But really, we're still dealing with drugs that are primarily consumed by middle-class or upper-class [people]. But if we're really putting lives first, we should be looking at all drugs, because it's mostly people who are using opioids that are dying."

*Tackling problematic drug use demands an
intersectional approach encompassing effective
poverty reduction measures.*

Canada and the United States have experienced a dramatic rise in opioid-related deaths over the past decade, driven in large part by the introduction of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl into the illegal opioid supply. While North America remains the centre of the opioid crisis, in the UK public health experts have warned that the country needs to be prepared for a similar scenario, and concerns have also been raised in the EU.

For Chang, the reality of the ever-evolving drug market, which sees new synthetic drugs constantly entering the supply, should serve as a warning call. She says that while decriminalisation – whereby the trade and possession of drugs remain illegal but personal possession and use are not a criminal offence – is an important first step, legal regulation is needed to ensure a safe supply of drugs. Chang insists that this is more than a health issue; it is also a matter of human rights. "People who use drugs have always been in favour of legal regulation and the right of people to consume the substances they want – and need, in a lot of instances," says Chang. "It's about creating a world where people aren't criminalised for what they choose to put in their own bodies and what they do to survive."

According to Chang, tackling problematic drug use also demands an intersectional approach encompassing effective poverty reduction measures.

Vasconcelos echoes Chang's concerns when he stresses that politicians and policymakers need to keep in mind the wider social and economic inequalities underlying problematic drug use: "We cannot run away from hard evidence. But we can and should apply our values, the values that make our party, when it comes to the way we portray the crises that intersect with drug abuse. The way that we suggest that people are treated more fairly and more inclusively. The way that we recognise that disadvantaged people, racialised people, LGBTQIA+ people are at a higher risk of being in a context where drug consumption can lead to drug dependence and addiction."

At the end of the Amsterdam Conference, participants – including Mayor Halsema, LEAP, INPUD and an array of other politicians and drug reform experts – signed the manifesto Dealing with Drugs, which calls for a move towards legal regulation, with drug laws based on harm reduction, public health, social justice and education – the same principles promoted by green parties in Portugal, England and Wales, and throughout Europe.

While the attendees celebrated the conference as a crucial first step towards legal regulation, there is also awareness of the challenges ahead. As Ruben Boomsma from LEAP stresses, prohibition and the message "drugs are bad, don't use them" have become so embedded in our societies over the past half-century that meaningful change will require a radical cultural shift as well as legal reform. Then there's the increasingly hostile political environment, with the rise of far-right parties all over Europe, including in countries with a record of decriminalisation and harm reduction programmes, such as the Czech Republic and Portugal.

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In the Netherlands, where the far-right Party for Freedom won the most seats in last November's elections, Songül Mutluer stresses that while the Labour-GroenLinks joint drug policy is a necessary starting point, the current political environment impedes serious talk of drug reform. "What we're doing isn't working," she says. "But I don't think there is room for big discussion in the Netherlands at the moment. The most right-wing parties don't even want to discuss it. That is an understatement. They probably also want to have a discussion on our toleration policy, looking back instead of looking forward."

Cities leading change

For legal regulation to become a reality, reform is needed at national and international levels. This puts city leaders in a difficult situation. As LEAP's Neil Woods emphasises, the negative consequences of drug prohibition are felt most harshly in urban areas. But while cities and mayors do not have the powers alone to implement and enforce legal change, this doesn't mean that they can't speak out, or implement targeted harm-reduction measures, such as safe consumption rooms for people who use drugs, which are now a feature in many cities in Europe, from Portugal to Germany – with Scotland set to be next.

For Zoë Garbett, a Green Councillor in East London who helped to write the revised GPEW drug policy and is now standing as the Green candidate for Mayor in London's May elections, local leaders have a

crucial role to play in leading the way on drug law reform. “That’s what elected officials should be doing,” she insists. “What we’re trying to effect in London is to do as much as possible within the existing framework, such as deprioritising the policing of cannabis. What Glasgow is doing, setting up safe consumption rooms, is a real inspiration.”

Garbett believes the position taken by Halsema and other local politicians is an important example of good leadership: “It’s really exciting that mayors across Europe are looking to do as much as possible with their powers to effect change not only in their own cities but also other cities. That’s what elected officials should be doing – using our powers to keep our residents and cities safe. We can’t sit around and wait for politicians at national level to make these changes.”



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