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# WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE DRUG SITUATION AND RESPONSE IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES? – INTRODUCTION

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Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, like other countries of the continent, faced the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including a rise in social and health inequalities (King, Loblova, 2021; Moiseenko et al., 2022), an increasing pressure on health systems (Lupu, Tiganasu, 2022; Vaitkevičiūtė, 2021; Webb et al., 2021) and a negative impact on mental health (Bojanowska et al., 2021; Grabowski et al., 2021; Reile et al., 2021). Similarly, the pandemic influenced drug demand, drug supply and drug-related response in Europe and around the globe. For example, there were a number of challenges for drug services to maintain the same level of service during the lockdown and provide treatment for new clients. As a consequence of the pandemic, drug services were forced to transform their operating procedures.

This special issue of the journal aims to provide an insight into the impact of the pandemic on drug use, the related harms, services and the drug market in selected countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is a result of horizontal cooperation of Reitox

National Focal Points (NFP) of the EMCDDA (European Drug Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction), which are the national drug observatories. The analysis presented in the special issue is based on the information available at the national level but also on joint work conducted in 2020 and 2021 by the EMCDDA, which was investigating the impact of the pandemic in Europe via rapid assessment studies in close cooperation with the NFPs (see article 1).

In addition, there has already been a platform for exchanging information between Poland and the Baltic countries organised in the form of annual Reitox Baltic Academies, devoted to various issues important for Central and Eastern Europe in the area of drugs and drug addiction. The results of this cooperation were presented at several scientific conferences<sup>1</sup>. The special issue is the first step in a number

<sup>1</sup> LxAddictions19: The future of addictions — new frontiers for policy, practice and science, 23–25 November 2019, SICAD, EMCDDA, Addiction journal, SSA, ISAJE; The 30th Conference of the European Society for Social Drug Research

of initiatives planned by the group on the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the prevalence of drug use and related problems and its implications for the future. For example, the next annual Reitox Baltic Academy meeting will take place later this year in Gdańsk. The objective of the meeting will be to update and complete the information presented in the special issue and start a discussion on the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic brought to the drugs field and the work of the NFPs in the short- and long-term future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not yet ended, while the countries of the region have been affected by another crisis related to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and a massive influx of Ukrainians to the bordering countries. The meeting will address the impact of the recent migration crises regarding drug use and available response, and future steps and strategies to build the national and EU preparedness.

In total, six articles were prepared by experts from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and the EMCDDA for this special issue. The journal opens with an article by EMCDDA staff covering the situation across Europe. The country-specific analyses are presented in the following articles. They show the situation primarily with regard to the prevalence of drug use and the problems associated with it. In the case of Latvia (Zile-Veisberga, 2020) and Estonia, the studies largely present the impact of the pandemic on the drug market.

As the available data show, the drug markets were not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic the way other areas of social and economic functioning were. Local problems related to the availability of drugs on the illicit markets were noted, but generally, the supply did not fall. Available data suggest that drug use patterns have not changed, but of course, there are some exceptions. Lithuanian students who used psychoactive substances irregularly were more likely to reduce the use of these substances or abstain during quarantine. However, those who used these substances regularly quite probably increased their use during the quarantine. According to one of Polish papers, the new psychoactive substances (NPS) use decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Garus-Pakowska et al., 2022). Data from the General Sanitary Inspectorate also indicated a drop in the number of non-fatal NPS overdoses (Główny..., 2022). However, when trying to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the drug situation and

the related problems, it is difficult to determine to what extent COVID-19 had an impact on the change of the situation and to what extent certain trends, such as the mentioned decreasing number of poisonings due to NPS in Poland or deaths due to drugs in Estonia (stable situation) (National Institute..., 2022), would continue anyway.

Undoubtedly, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the Internet as an effective channel for distributing drugs increased. This again indicates that while modern technology might prove useful in solving problems of the contemporary world, it might also turn against us.

Among new challenges for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is the war in Ukraine (Masters, 2022) and the support to be provided to millions of displaced Ukrainians (Panayotatos, 2022). A psychoactive substance helpline and psychological support for people from Ukraine have been launched in Poland. There are also plans to launch activities aimed at, on the one hand, examining the needs of children and adolescents from Ukraine and, on the other, planning prevention programs addressed to them. In March, the first women from Ukraine who came to Poland as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine were admitted to several substitution treatment programs in Poland. Similar experience is shared by the countries of the region covered in this special issue. Therefore, international collaboration is needed to analyse the situation, learn from the experience of different countries and draw conclusions on the possible direction in which our aid and support activities in the field of addiction should go.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff of the EMCDDA, Reitox Focal Points and the experts cooperating with them for preparing the papers for this issue.

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