

## NEWS

# Drug trafficking in Europe changes as expertise in synthetic drug production increases

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Europe's illicit drugs trade is entering a new era, forcing policy makers to rethink their responses, says a report commissioned by Cecilia Malmström, the European commissioner for home affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the illicit drug market in Europe centred on specific drugs trafficked by specialised operators along well defined routes. Now experts note that the market is far more fluid as new routes and multi-substance consignments become more common.

Commenting on the findings, Malmström said, "Drug markets are evolving, and we need to keep pace in our response. This calls for increased cooperation at EU level. National measures are simply insufficient, no matter how robust they are."

The *EU Drug Markets Report* takes a holistic approach towards drug trafficking, following the economic chain from production to consumption. It results from cooperation between two specialised European agencies under Malmström's responsibility, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and the European policing agency Europol. The collaboration combined the insights of the centre's expertise in monitoring drug developments with Europol's operational understanding of trends in organised crime.

Exploitation of legitimate forms of transport such as containers, couriers, and postal services is one feature of the new drugs scene, along with use of the internet as a marketplace. Another is increased innovation as European countries become a source of knowhow on cannabis cultivation and synthetic drug production.

The report highlights the rise in new psychoactive substances that are largely uncontrolled by international drug laws. Last year 73 new substances were reported, up from 49 in 2011. It emphasises the difficulty in identifying new drugs that belong to diverse chemical groups and are sold in products that may contain mixtures of substances that change over time.

Heroin continues to be responsible for severe health and social problems, but its use in the EU seems to be declining. Cocaine remains the most commonly used illicit stimulant in Europe, but the report indicates that its use peaked in around 2008 and has fallen slightly since.

Both European agencies acknowledge that the diversity and sophistication of cannabis products, producers, and sources make its use difficult to control.

● The European Commission has called for an EU-wide ban on "4-MA," a synthetic substance with similar physical effects to those of amphetamines. It is already illegal in 10 EU countries and has been associated with 21 deaths in Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2012.

1 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Europol. EU drug markets report: strategic analysis. Jan 2013. [www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/drug-markets](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/drug-markets).

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