

Pointillist images of drug use

Petra Kouvonon & Astrid Skretting & Pia Rosenqvist (eds.)

Drugs in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Common concerns, different realities. NAD Publication No 48. Helsinki, 2006, 181 p.

The Nordic Centre (former Council) for Alcohol and Drug Research (NAD) has a long history of comparative research on drugs in the whole of Northern Europe. Several reports discussing alcohol and illicit drugs in the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) have been published as part of the Council's publication series since its start in 1980. Drug use was also one of the problems discussed within the framework of the Council's Baltica project, initiated already in 1990 – i.e., almost as soon as it became possible to do research on such sensitive issues in what until then were the countries of the rapidly dissolving Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union. In retrospect, that was also when the Eastern part of the Baltic Sea region was for the first time seriously confronted with the spread of illicit drugs – a largely unknown problem until then, though by now an issue of doubtless topicality and a major concern.

The new volume of NAD's publication series draws on this research tradition, but it is also a reaction to a growing political demand. As told by the Foreword, the book has arisen as part of an effort to strengthen the co-operation between the five Nordic and three Baltic countries in countering the problems of drug use and trafficking. It reports on the state of current knowledge, mainly on the basis of secondary sources (complemented by results of a fact-finding mission in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the St. Petersburg region by Erle Rikmann and Katri Vallaste). After a short overview by the three volume editors of the report's main findings, the subsequent chapters address the prevalence of drug use and its consequences in Nordic and

Baltic countries (chapters 1 and 2 by Petra Kouvonon), the treatment and harm reduction measures (chapter 3 by Astrid Skretting), the illicit drug market (chapter 5 by Mikko Salasuo), and the governmental response as reflected by the situation of prisons, prevention systems and national drug control policies (chapters 4, 6 and 7 by Ann Christin Rognmo Olsen). The eight Nordic and Baltic countries are discussed in every chapter, while the first three include some information also on the St. Petersburg region.

The chapters are organised according to a common model. Each chapter addresses a few central issues. The situation with regard to each one of them is reported country by country, after which follows a short summary of the main findings, often accompanied by comparative tables. After that, it goes on to discuss the next issue; most articles end with a short conclusions section. The standard chapter structure is intended to make the volume easier to read and to use as a reference source. This said, the relatively thin book is still by no means light reading. It includes a lot of information, of various forms and quality. Data from police, customs, treatment organisations and surveys are complemented by different sources of expert opinion. National differences in presenting statistics and defining the issues at stake forces the reader to preserve an attentive state of mind while trying to assess the situation.

Being illicit, drug use is also a clandestine activity. Being politically sensitive, the data on drug use easily becomes affected by changes in policy priorities. Being relatively new in the Baltic countries and in the St. Petersburg region, the treatment, rehabilitation and control systems are rapidly changing and developing. Little information has already accumulated and been made accessible, and it tends to become quickly outdated. The eight countries and one region are different with respect to the historical background of their drug problems, but also in regard to the structures that collect and deliver information. For all these reasons, the gathering, comparison and assessment

of data becomes an especially challenging task.

Obviously, what results from these challenges is that the data presented are of highly varying quality; their ability to represent the reality of drug issues is sometimes questionable. For instance, a table on pp 36–37 presents a comparison of the number of problem drug users in different countries per 100,000 of population, but it also shows that the defining criteria have been different for each country, and that in some countries, one has not had anything more to rely on than expert estimates based on unspecified definitions of “problem use”. When reporting on treatment and policy measures, the authors have at times been only able to refer to government plans, without having further information about whether or how they have been implemented (and with what kinds of resources). The size of the effort undertaken and the call for topicality together dictate, that the report cannot avoid often remaining an account of the mere surface of the drug situation today.

Yet, the chain is this time stronger than its weakest link. Even if much of the data is ridden with problems (as the authors are obviously well aware of), a general image reveals itself to the reader who manages to orientate between the mix of a legion of reliable and not-so-reliable pieces of information. A *fin-de-siècle* school of art called pointillism became known for exploiting the effect of letting hundreds of small spots of different colours create foggy, but clearly recognizable images (their works should be looked at from a distance). In the same way, the data presented in the NAD volume add up to a general image. The changed geopolitical situation has obviously had serious consequences for the drug situation in Europe. After their relative isolation from the drug markets and subcultures of the West, the Central and East European countries have within the span of a few years become both producers and transit routes for illicit drugs. A rapid rise in consumption is visible in the data from the Baltic countries and the St. Petersburg

region, though the rising new drug wave has likewise affected the Nordic countries. At the same time, their treatment and prevention systems have been better prepared than those of their Eastern neighbours.

Despite clear early warning signals, the policy makers of the Baltic countries did not realise the seriousness of the challenge until the turn of the Millennium. While Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania now have a lack of resources and trained personnel to tackle the problems, they still seem to be consciously developing their prevention, control and treatment policies. In comparison, the situation is more complicated in St. Petersburg: many of the treatment measures initiated by the municipal government, non-governmental organisations, or foreign donors actually violate the existing federal legislation. So whereas the main challenge currently facing the three Baltic countries seems to be a lack of resources, the development of treatment and rehabilitation in Russia is restricted by poorly developed legislation and a lack of political will at the federal level.

Some differences between the three Baltic countries are also visible. Many mutually independent indicators of different types show a higher prevalence of illicit drug consumption in Estonia than in Latvia and Lithuania. A possible explanation suggested by Petra Kouvonon (p. 24; with reference to a publication by myself and Jacek Moskalewicz) is that the economic restructuring policies have been more harsh in Estonia and resulted in the marginalisation of large segments of the population. However, Estonia’s recent relative success in improving its economic standard of living has not been accompanied by any indicators of possible downward trends in drug use; there are also severely marginalised regions and population groups in Latvia and Lithuania. Among possible explanations, the country’s geographic position between two large gaps of living standards is the most obvious. The two Estonian cities most ridden with drug problems – Tallinn and Narva – are also border cities and meeting points between

different regions. They are points of contact, on the one hand, between the richer, leisure-seeking Nordic citizens and the new EU citizens of Eastern Central Europe; on the other hand, the Estonian Eastern border is a point of contact between the EU and Russia with its Southern and Asian partners of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well. Where there is transit, there is also a market; where there is a market, there are also consumers.

What the NAD team has accomplished is a compact timely report direct from the front of the latest news on illicit drugs in Northern Europe. Despite problems with acquiring comparable and reliable data, the general trends suggested are informative and plausible. The general picture given of the treatment, control and policy making systems in different countries will continue to have relevance even after newer data become available on the vast number of other issues discussed in the volume.

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