



Council of Europe International Cooperation Group on Drugs and Addictions

The genesis of the Pompidou Group

By Denis Huber Executive Secretary of the Pompidou Group. Validated by Alain Pompidou, the son of President Pompidou.

Georges Pompidou was elected President of the French Republic on 15 June 1969. He takes up his duties a few days later, on 20 June, succeeding General de Gaulle, of whom he was Prime Minister from 1962 to 1968.

One of the burning issues he inherited was the easing of tensions between France and the United States, generally speaking after a decade in which the founder of the Fifth Republic had made the Americans (and their closest British allies) swallow many snakes, but also on a more specific ground: the existence of a vast heroin trafficking network linking the East (especially the former French colonies) and North America, via France, with the port of Marseille as a hub. This traffic, whose origins date back to the 1930s, but which reached its peak in the 1960s, went down in history as the "French connection".¹

As early as August 1969, Richard Nixon intervened with his French counterpart to establish closer cooperation between the police forces of the two countries in the fight against drugs. This is one of the major priorities of the new American president, who from the start of his term in office tightened his country's legislation in this area. The United States is facing a dramatic situation: the country had 20 000 heroin addicts at the end of the Second World War, and by the end of the 1960s had around ten times as many. Drug use and trafficking are in the heart of American metropolises, particularly New York and San Francisco, and particularly affect young men, including soldiers who were enlisted in Vietnam or demobilised, among whom those from the black minority are over-represented.

As a follow-up to this meeting between the two Heads of State, it was decided to develop technical collaboration between the American and French police services at the three essential stages of major drug trafficking: production, processing and consumption. Regular co-ordination meetings between the officials were planned (the first being held in Paris in December 1969).²

¹ It was popularised shortly afterwards by the film of the same name, which won the three most prestigious Oscars (best film, best director, best actor) in 1972.

² The personal agreement between the two presidents will make it possible to quickly overcome the existing animosities between the administrations (certain American interlocutors went so far as to describe France as a "narcostate").

It was in a peaceful atmosphere that the subject of the fight against drugs was raised again by the American President during George Pompidou's visit to the United States in February 1970. One year later, on 26 February 1971, a Franco-American memorandum of understanding was signed in Paris by Raymond Marcellin, Minister of the Interior, and John Mitchell, Attorney General of the United States. It formalises close cooperation between the specialised services in the fight against illicit drug trafficking in the two countries. In the meantime, a new law was enacted on 31 December 1970, significantly increasing the penalties for traffickers in France and advocating a repressive approach towards users as well.

At the international level, there was a growing awareness of the dangers associated with the development and increasingly widespread use of substances such as amphetamines (many of which are still legal and even available over the counter in pharmacies) or hallucinogens (such as LSD, the symbol of the 1960s counterculture). It led to the adoption, on 21 February 1971, of the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, which completed the legal arsenal put in place by the United Nations through the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs adopted ten years earlier.

An inter-ministerial meeting was convened in Matignon on 24 June 1971 to review the implementation of this new legislation. The meeting made two observations: firstly, the worrying trend in drug use, particularly cannabis, with young people being particularly affected; and secondly, the lack of resources available to the police and the judiciary to cope with the tightening of the legislative framework, with priority being given to combating traffickers rather than prosecuting users. There is also concern about the situation in schools, where drug use is spreading without the alarm bells being rung: "The golden rule is not to talk about it".

In a note addressed to Georges Pompidou by the Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic, the warning is given: "The evolution currently observed would be the same as that known in America ten years ago. This is worrying since, despite considerable means, the evolution in the U.S.A. has not been able to be contained. "The President reacted by confirming his determination to act with the utmost firmness ("Above all, we must crack down", wrote Georges Pompidou in his own hand in the margin of the text), while at the same time opening up a new horizon for action: "We must take the matter to the European level" (another handwritten annotation).

At this time there is little awareness among the French or European public opinion of the existence of a drug problem. Whereas a few days earlier, at a still famous press conference, President Nixon had declared "the war on drugs", the French President has to put all his weight in the balance to convince his peers and public opinion of the need to act.³

Taking action in the middle of the summer, Georges Pompidou sent a letter dated 6 August 1971 to the Prime Ministers of the five other member countries of the European Community (Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries), as well as to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, whose France supported a new application for membership of the EEC, after the two vetoes imposed by General de Gaulle in 1963 and 1967. He stressed the urgency and seriousness of the emerging drug problem in Europe, particularly for young people, and advocated the immediate establishment of European cooperation in the fight against drugs, through the creation of "a

³ The death in Paris on 5 July 1971 of Doors singer Jim Morrison, a few months after the deaths of two other rock idols Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, helped to make young people (and therefore their parents) aware of the dangers of drugs.

permanent body bringing together experts in judicial repression, the fight against drug addiction, public health and education" from the seven countries in question.⁴

The "Pompidou Group" was born!

⁴ It is interesting to note that from the outset a multidisciplinary approach is advocated, although the emphasis is clearly on repression.