

Speech by Under-Secretary Mantovano at the Ministerial Conference "Human Rights at the Heart of Drugs and Addiction Policies"

Below is the text of the speech by Alfredo Mantovano, Secretary of State at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, at the 18th Ministerial Conference of the International Cooperation Group on Drugs and Addiction (Pompidou Group) entitled "Human Rights at the Centre of Drugs and Addiction Policies" in Lisbon, Portugal.

Honourable Chair, Authorities and Distinguished Delegates, I would like to thank the Portuguese Presidency, which is hosting the Ministerial Conference in this magnificent city, and the Secretariat of the Pompidou Group, which with great effort has helped to organise this event. I thank all the delegations present, for the trust shown towards Italy.

1. Our nation is among those that the then French President Georges Pompidou addressed in 1971 when, with his initiative, he marked the beginning of the history of the Group that would bear his name. Since then, the Group has grown and expanded and last year celebrated half a century of activity: in view of its history, we hope to be worthy continuators of the work of the Presidencies that preceded us. The Portuguese one led the Group at a unique historical moment, with the Covid crisis, and yet managed to keep the member states united and leave its successors with an increased number of members and a new statute. We are counting on the contribution not only of the Portuguese delegation, but also of the Norwegian and French delegations, and of the Swiss delegation, whom we congratulate on their election to the vice-presidency.

We intend to deepen the already existing relationship with each of the delegations of the Member Countries, Observers and countries that otherwise participate in the Group's activities, to get to know the reality of each State well, to increase the exchange and sharing of experiences, models

and good practices, and to involve other international organisations, in a spirit of collaboration.

With your approval and the consent of the Secretariat, we will be happy to host you in Italy for events and meetings in the directions indicated above. There are many topics in which we will be interested: the new Statute allows us to address issues related to addiction not only to drugs, but also to alcohol or gambling.

2. The necessary complexity of the addiction issue makes prevention activities a priority, to which increasingly adequate information, first and foremost among the very young, accompanied by attention to the treatment and recovery of addicts, is functional.

Prevention policies must be directed especially at adolescents, and cannot tolerate uncertainties in terms of communication: in most European countries, important results have been achieved in terms of reducing tobacco consumption, thanks to targeted sanctions and large-scale information campaigns; if similar results have not been achieved for drug consumption, it is also because misleading messages about the alleged harmlessness or lightness of certain substances are circulated too insistently.

Some orders, for example, qualify GHB, γ -hydroxybutyric acid, as 'mild': administered in a controlled manner and at defined dosages, it can have positive effects in patients with sleep disorders and can help in the treatment of alcoholism. The problem is its use not under prescription, but arbitrarily, outside of any prescription and professional verification, after purchase on the web or in the street: this is the reason, alas tragic, for the media's assumed title of 'date rape drug'.

3. We are well aware that although drug addiction is an emergency, few people talk about it. Drugs make victims, but - except in the immediacy of each individual tragedy - it is ignored as the cause of them. It is not a natural calamity: it is wanted, financially supported, and propagandized, and in addition favoured by laws that are not always rational. In countries where

legalisation has become law, the emergency has a dramatic consistency: 'Legal drugs,' explains Pino Arlacchi, former director from 1997 to 2002 of the UNODC - United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, 'have generated in the United States an audience of 10 million users, and a number of overdose deaths that last month reached 100,000 a year (in Europe 7,000). Freedom to take drugs has thus become the leading cause of death (pre-Covid) of US citizens under the age of 50".

We are called upon to address this emergency with prevention campaigns, first and foremost in schools. In dialogue with the media, we should agree on how harmful it is to promote in talk shows or fictions substances that are too lightly defined as 'soft'. And we are called upon to do so by overcoming many clichés, first and foremost the one according to which there are drugs that do no harm: we know very well, however, to give an example, that the 'joint' in circulation today, to which many give either a pain-relieving effect, or in any case an innocent flavour of youthful transgression, often has negative effects, which can become non-reversible in adolescents, when it has high percentages of active ingredient. The active ingredient of cannabis, THC, can be found in the untreated plant in a maximum percentage of 2.5%. In Italy - but I imagine that this is also the case in other countries - while in the seizures of this substance made by the police thirty years ago, THC had an average percentage of between 1 and 2%, in the seizures made in 2020 it reached an average of 25% for hashish, with peaks of 78%, and 10% for marijuana, with peaks of 39%: this is made possible by intensive cultivation and phyto-productive manipulations that concentrate the active ingredient and alter the characteristics of the plant.

It is really hard to qualify as 'light' a cannabis derivative with 25% active ingredient, let alone 39% or 78%.

4. More drugs are in circulation today than a few years ago. Most of the addicts of the various types of drugs drive a vehicle, but few wonder why road accidents of inexplicable causality are on the increase: one 20-year-old crashes his moped into a tree without the road being bumpy or in a

thunderstorm; another crashes his car going straight ahead where there was a bend, again without an obstacle to do so. Few wonder why fights, robberies, or even thefts, which degenerate into murders, are on the increase: if the original intent was to kill, the perpetrator would take immediate action, but instead an argument or intimidation starts, and then there is no stopping. Those brakes that are not applied on the motorbike or car do not even work to just give a punch, or point a gun without pulling the trigger.

In the multiplication of these episodes there are certainly components of violence, but there is one main strand: the widespread distribution of drugs, their often untrammelled sale in the light of day, their passing from hand to hand in the classrooms and toilets of schools and youth hangouts.

5. A human rights-based approach that is non-stigmatising and non-discriminatory towards the drug dependent person is a priority: if we want to build welcoming and safe communities, access to care and treatment services must not be denied to anyone. The right to health must be guaranteed to all. Any policy in this area must be based on scientific evidence accredited by institutional sources, as only this can guarantee its effectiveness.

The pandemic we have been through has reminded us of the value of science and how technological innovation can be a valuable ally in every field, including drugs and addiction. Among the essential aspects of the Pompidou Group's work, we cannot forget the fundamental activity of coordination and exchange of information and good practices. One of the most important purposes of this network is to build links and connections and to ensure the highest level of sharing: the more states and international organisations are involved, the more valuable and effective these actions become. We therefore express our appreciation for the efforts made in this regard by the previous Presidencies and the Secretariat: 41 States, not counting those other States that are not members of the Pompidou Group but nevertheless participate in the regional activities, represents an incredible achievement. We therefore look forward with optimism to the Group's future prospects for expansion

and hope that during our term of office we will be able to see other states join this community, including new entrants and reconnections of those who were already members.

6. I conclude by saying that the appeal to rights requires us to concern ourselves, even before the milligrams more or less of each of the substances listed in the various tables of individual states, with something more important: namely, the meaning to be given to terms such as freedom and responsibility. For those who intend to rewrite drug laws by bringing them closer to experiences of legalisation, freedom has the post-1968 declination of doing what one wants, including killing oneself, or in any case putting oneself in the condition of no longer being oneself.

Those who oppose this drift are convinced instead that freedom consists in always respecting oneself and one's dignity and giving meaning to one's life. If we talk about rights, this is the terrain of confrontation and clash.

Important goals have already been achieved, enormous strides have been made over the years in responding to the problems posed by drugs and addiction, but we are continually faced with new challenges: together, united, we will always be able to find new answers.