



Interview with Thomas Kattau

A look back at his career and his contribution to the Pompidou Group.

Interview conducted by Elsa Telecki

We are delighted to share this interview, Thomas Kattau, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Pompidou Group, in which he reveals the challenges he faced and his contribution to the work of the Council of Europe. He will leave the Council on 31 May 2024, after having served the Organisation for 31 years.

A brief overview of Thomas' career.

Thomas Kattau, a German national, studied law, sociology and economics in Germany, Australia and the United States. He worked as a partner in a law firm and later moved into academia, teaching comparative law and researching criminology. During Germany's reunification, he worked as a consultant focusing on the offsetting up the structures for social partnership and bringing the new labour law system to East Germany. He then moved on to the Council of Europe where he held various positions from focusing on children's policies, to assistance programmes for Eastern Europe and conflict resolution in the Balkans and North Caucasus. He has also taught European social policy and international conflict resolution at the Syracuse University in Strasbourg. Over the last twenty years he has been the Deputy Executive Secretary of the Pompidou Group, the Council of Europe international cooperation platform on drugs and addictions.

From Childhood policies to Drug policies

After two intense years as a consultant in the German reunification process, Thomas' girlfriend, now his wife, suggested him to “get off the fast track”. He responded by applying for a national competition advertised in the newspaper, which secured him a job with the Council of Europe in 1993. Given the choice of joining the legal department or setting up a new unit focusing on childhood policies within the Social Affairs Directorate, he chose the latter, despite being a lawyer. Intrigued by the prospect of venturing into an unfamiliar area, he saw it as an opportunity to engage with something new and fascinating.

“So, I decided to delve into childhood policies totally blind and I set up that sector”.

Inspired by the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Thomas Kattau created a whole new area of activity within the Council to deal with childhood policies. In particular, he focused on involving children in decision-making, a concept that was controversial at the time. While some advocated a child protection approach, arguing that children were incapable of making decisions, others supported a child rights approach, arguing that children's voices should be heard and respected. This approach, exemplified by the UN Convention, advocated for children's views to be considered, reflecting a shift towards recognising children as active participants in society rather than simply an object of protection.

This dedication culminated in the creation of the first Children's Forum, bringing together policy makers and young people under 18. His vision to have “real children from the real world” prompted him to make a strong case for the inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds, including those from children's homes or facing legal problems. He challenged the idea of selecting only exceptionally gifted children, pointing out that “the majority of children are not maths champions or young ambassadors”. To address concerns about the legitimacy of the selection, he suggests involving international NGOs, a concept which worked out. Thomas was intrigued and inspired with the rich contributions from this diverse range of young participants in Forum meetings. This experience made him a devoted advocate for giving children from all walks of life a voice.

Thomas' work with reforming the Romanian orphanage system in Romina and the juvenile prison system in Russia left a profound impact on him, describing the plight of Aids infected children in Romania he was confronted with as the most traumatizing experience in his life. Despite the challenges he was ever more motivated to drive for change and go the extra mile for it. After having transitioned to post-conflict stabilization efforts in Kosovo and Bosnia, and then for nearly two years trying to investigate human rights violation in the Chechnya war, he recognized the risk of becoming too immersed in conflict situations and saw the need to change track.

When he came back to Strasbourg from Chechnya he wondered where he should be going? He found his new opportunity by joining the Pompidou Group in 2002. Despite knowing little about drugs, Thomas took on the role of prevention administrator: “I can be interested in many things, for me, the people you work with are always most important. If you choose a subject but don't get on with the people you have to work with, it's not good. I knew that. This is why I looked first for a good boss! At the time, the Executive Secretary of the Pompidou Group was Christopher Luckett and we hit it off right away. So, I joined the Pompidou Group in 2002 not knowing anything about drugs, except the ones I'd tried....like alcohol and nicotine”.

A new corporate identity and visibility for the Pompidou Group

Quickly, Thomas became aware of the need to improve the department's corporate identity and visibility. He identified a lack of aesthetic appeal in the documents and “boring” reports. Thomas took the initiative by introducing a new corporate logo, colourful brochures with photos, videos¹ and the use of social media², which was “revolutionary” at the time. Indeed, he emphasised the importance of clear communication, opting for videos and not only long policy papers to convey messages effectively: “If we think our message is important, we have to understand that if it's 40 pages, nobody or not many people are going to read it”.

Thomas's efforts led to the development of a communication strategy for the Pompidou Group: “I was the first one to do a communication strategy for the Pompidou Group: What to say to whom? What does it mean to use which media? And I liked doing it!”

A peer-led approach to prevention: illustrated by the creation of the European Drug Prevention Prize

Following his experiences with the Forum for children, Thomas also recognised the importance of developing a peer-led approach to prevention that puts young people at the centre. Despite initial resistance from some quarters, Thomas worked to institutionalise this approach by organising activities and initiatives that empowered young people to drive prevention efforts. One notable initiative was the creation of the European Drug Prevention Prize³. This competition is held on average every two or three years and provides an opportunity to present innovative drug prevention projects developed and organised by young people themselves. The jury is also made up of young people. Thomas noted the scepticism of some who questioned its legitimacy, but he did not share that view. Instead, he stressed the value of the youth perspective: “My personal takeaways is that I'm so impressed by young people. We adults, we're looking for things which confirm our biases. Kids don't have that many biases because visors come with time.”

¹ Several videos produced by the Pompidou Group are available on this page:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/pompidou/videos>

²The various social media of the Pompidou Group can be found here: [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#)

³ More information about the European Drug Prevention Prize can be found on the following web page :

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/pompidou/activities/prevention-prize>

The difficulty of creating a Public Health Convention

By spearheading initiatives to promote human rights in drug policy, Thomas has underlined the need for significant reform in different areas of drug policy. He argued for a Council of Europe Public Health Convention to complement existing UN conventions, with the aim of shifting the focus from criminalisation to health-centred approaches. Despite his meticulous preparation and an international peer review of his feasibility study, the initiative ultimately stalled due to the reluctance of certain countries, highlighting the challenges of implementing innovative drug policy frameworks. With honesty, Thomas remarked: “But you know, some things work, other things fail, no matter how good you think they are, no matter what you invest. Even though I was very proud of it, it didn't lead anywhere”.

Introducing the need for a mid-term review, executive training and law enforcement in drug policy

“To see if we are on track with what we do and if we can make a difference”, Thomas considered it essential to set up a regular half-way evaluations of the Pompidou Groups work programme. According to him, this is to “see if we're really getting results and meeting needs”.

He also introduced continuing professional development in drug policy administration, recognising the need to improve the knowledge of policy makers. He managed to establish annual executive training courses tailored to the needs of participants, leading to the creation of the International Drug Policy Academy in 2019: “We've developed in the course very specific modules based on the needs of people attending the course. That was one of the unique things why this kept going and then became the well-known Executive Training of the Pompidou Group, which is very popular and that was further institutionalised with the International Drug Policy Academy which exists for some years now, where we offer different courses”. Additionally, he initiated efforts to disseminate effective strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting the sharing of innovative practices through video documentation and an online platform⁴.

Recently, Thomas has focused his efforts on improving coordination between law enforcement agencies. Recognising the need to streamline efforts, he took inspiration from the Lisbon Conference on Addictions and proposed a structured approach. The new Annual Conference of Drug Enforcement Networks proved to be a success and paved the way for greater cooperation and efficiency in drug law enforcement.

⁴Online platform ‘save lives – protect people’ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/pompidou/covid-19>

Promoting human rights in drug policy

Thomas has also been involved in the creation and implementation of a new self-assessment tool on human rights and drug policies⁵ launched at the 18th Ministerial Conference of the Europe Pompidou Group in Lisbon in December 2022⁶. This tool provides a comprehensive legislative analysis that examines the compatibility between human rights standards and drug policies across diverse national contexts. Additionally, he prepared the “Guidance for aligning drug policy with human rights”, a draft policy paper aimed at aligning drug policies with human rights principles, which is currently under consideration for adoption at the 94th Meeting of Permanent Correspondents in May 2024. It is envisaged that these guidelines will then be transmitted to the Steering Committee on Human Rights (CDDH) for further adoption as a formal recommendation by the Committee of Ministers.

Driving innovation at the heart of the Pompidou Group

Thomas concludes the interview by highlighting the innovative aspect of the Pompidou Group. With limited budgets, the Group managed to foster open debate and pursue groundbreaking initiatives, such as addressing drug prevalence in prisons and establishing indicators for drug monitoring. He emphasizes the importance of continuous innovation, stating: “If we just keep repeating what others are saying, which is the easy way out, then there's no reason for us to exist.” He believes that this must be the mindset for the Pompidou Group to sustain its relevance and added value.

Moreover, he encourages young professionals to dare to initiate change within their fields, even if ideas only may prove valuable in the future: “You're not working here to guard the status quo. You should strive to bring something new to the table. You not only owe this to the organisation but you also owe this to yourself. It's not others who create satisfaction for you, it's you who create it for yourself by doing something exciting and inspiring”.

Finally, he ended the interview with a key message from his experience:

“We have to look at the things that nobody dares to look at, only then we see the way forward”.

As Thomas comes to the end of his term of office at the Pompidou Group, we would like to express our sincere gratitude for his invaluable efforts. His contributions have left an indelible mark. Thank you, Thomas, for inspiring us all to strive for excellence and to dare to make a difference.

⁵ [Pompidou Group provided new human right tool - Pompidou Group \(coe.int\)](#)

⁶ [Opening of the 18th Ministerial Conference of the Pompidou Group in Lisbon - Deputy Secretary General \(coe.int\)](#)