

## The 2016 UNGASS on drugs: Why we need a strong European voice

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The 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs is rapidly approaching. It is a key opportunity for governments, civil society and others to acknowledge and discuss the failings of the current drugs response. As this session will highlight, the highly punitive approach to drug control based on a narrow interpretation of the international treaties is simply not working.

The UNGASS is a chance to reflect on how to control drugs in society and to consider more effective and humane policies. Although treaty reform is unlikely to happen in 2016, the international community is at least expected to reflect on developments in certain countries (such as Uruguay and the USA), and should openly and objectively address the lack of policy coherence between drug control objectives and public health and human rights outcomes for people who use drugs.

In the past, European countries have often played an important leadership role within global drug policy debates – particularly on issues such as harm reduction. Yet in recent years, the main calls for debate and reform have instead come from Latin America. The positive role that Europe can play in these global processes must not be underestimated. Many European countries are implementing more pragmatic and less draconian responses to drug control, with the decriminalisation or depenalisation of drug possession for personal use in several EU Member States. Incarceration rates for drug offences in Europe are also much lower than, for example, the USA and Asia, and many European countries have managed to prevent or control HIV epidemics among people who inject drugs.

The European Union, as a coordinated body, needs to be stronger in the international debates – promoting harm reduction and calling for more balanced, human rights based drug policies. This approach is underpinned to a large degree by the new EU drug strategy. If consensus cannot be reached within the EU “bloc”, then individual European countries should speak out more in international discussions, show more leadership on their key issues, and formally support their allies from Latin America.

This presentation will describe the debates to date, the road to the 2016 UNGASS, and the prospects for debate and reform in Europe and beyond.