I-SEE
European Project
on New Psychoactive Substance

Co-funded by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union
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EUROPEAN PROJECT "I-SEE"

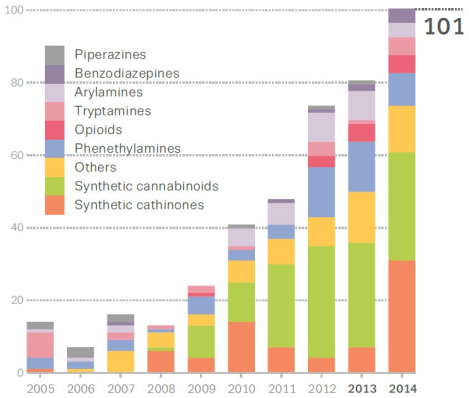
for strengthening information exchange between Italy and South East Europe neighboring countries on New Psychoactive Substances

1. The NPS phenomenon: some data

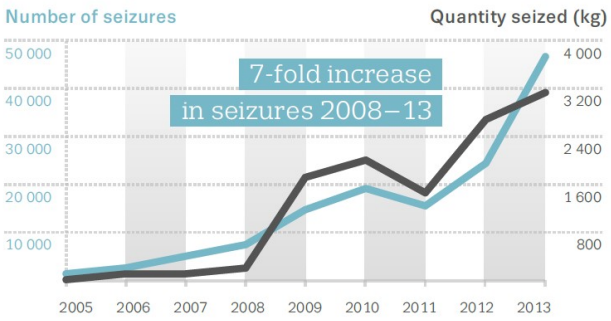
As reported by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), over the past 5 years there has been an unprecedented increase in the number, type and availability of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) in Europe. During 2014, 101 new substances were reported for the first time to the EU Early Warning System: 31 cathinones, 30 cannabinoids, 9 phenethylamines, 5 opioids, 5 tryptamines, 4 benzodiazepines, 4 arylalkylamines and 13 substances that do not conform to the aforementioned groups. This brings the total number of substances being monitored by the EMCDDA to more than 450, with more than half of these being reported in the last three years alone (Figure 1).

European data on seizure from law enforcement also confirm the growth and importance of this drug market. Between 2008 and 2013 there was a seven-fold increase in the number of seizures reported across Europe. In 2013, almost 47.000 seizures weighing more than 3.1 tonnes were reported to the EU EWS (Figure 2).

Number of NPS reported to the EU EWS (2005-2014). Source: EMCDDA, 2015



Number of seizures of NPS and quantity seized (2005-2014). Source: EMCDDA, 2015



Note: 2009 data exclude six tonnes of ketamine seized by one country, due to a lack of contextual information.

As the market has grown in recent years, the EMCDDA has also had to deal with a **growing number of reports of serious harms**, often related to **acute toxicity leading to hospitalization and deaths**. Since 2005, **117 public health alerts were issued at EU level**, with more than 70% of these issued in the last five years. During 2014, 16 alerts were issued.

The last decade has seen the emergence of new internet technologies that have acted as important facilitators of online drug markets, opening the market up to a wider audience. **Drug markets operating on the web (both clear and dark net) appear to be primarily associated with the distribution of NPS**. As a consequence, a rapid expansion of the online market for NPS has been observed over the last decade, with these substances sold as both 'research chemicals' and 'legal highs' in online shops, available to everyone surfing the net, especially to young people very comfortable with new IT technologies, and more and more frequently responsible of NPS related intoxications.

2. The I-SEE project

Critically, strong national and regional Early Warning Systems has to continue to play a central role in the early detection of harms and help to ensure timely public health responses. Therefore, considering the geographical proximity of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia and their being at the crossroads of European Eastern-Western routes for NPS trafficking, a project on NPS involving the three Early Warning Systems (EWS) was approved and co-funded by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union.

The project aim is strengthening information exchange between Italy and South East Europe neighboring countries on NPS. To that purpose, the project intends to support the development and consolidation of national EWS networks, create a joint mechanism for information exchange, mutual learning and good practice exchange among EWS, increase information exchange towards Law Enforcement to ease and strengthen activities aimed at early identifying and intercepting NPS supply.

The project involves 5 partners: from Italy, the University of Florence, as coordinator; from Slovenia, the National Institute of Public Health, the Ministry of Interior Police and the Association DrogArt; from Croatia, the University of Split School of Medicine.

3. Main results

Main results achieved so far are described below:

- **A growing number of operating units has joined the network of national EWS, especially in Slovenia and Croatia**. That allowed the increasing participation of professionals through national training events (4 national trainings in Slovenia, 2 in Croatia): staff from health facilities, laboratories, Law Enforcement and NGOs were involved.

- More specifically, in **Slovenia**, 8 regional coordinators of EWS have been appointed and, as a consequence, 8 regional early warning systems started to operate in coordination with the national one, run by the National Institute of Public Health. In addition, 4 new NGO points have been established by DrogArt Association to anonymously collect NPS samples and bring them for analysis to the National Forensic Laboratory (NFL) of the Ministry of Interior Police. According to NPS detection, in 2015, the NFL analyzed 26 anonymously collected samples. In 7 of them, NPS were present (in other samples, "classical drugs" or non drug compounds were detected). 3 novel NPS were identified for the first time in Slovenia: 3-MeO-PCP, Clonazolam and Flubromazolam. Slovenian partners are now working to describe **an updated procedure for anonymously collecting drug samples** by NGOs directly from consumers and for seizing substances and analyze them at the National Forensic Laboratory of the Ministry of Interior Police.

- In **Croatia**, a monitoring system of NPS related intoxications was launched as a preparation for Ultra Europe Music Festival, Split 2015. **Operational guidelines and communication protocols about NPS related intoxications management** have been draft and shared among people working in emergency services to better and faster tackle NPS poisonings. To this regard, an Official Standardized Worksheet for monitoring patients with suspected NPS intoxications have been developed for the Croatian EWS clinical network. That will allow health professionals to collect clinical information about patients with suspected NPS intoxication and will help the analysis of their biological fluids at the Clinical Hospital Center Split, Toxicological Laboratory, Department of Forensic Medicine of the University of Split.

- In **Italy**, the University of Florence acquired and distributed to project partners **more than 50 reference materials**. Furthermore, the University of Florence also created analytical protocols to analyze both seized and biological samples. That allowed the University to analyze more than 600

seized samples in 2015 where NPS like 3-MMC, 4-FA, Penthedrone and Methoxethamine were detected, beside other traditional drugs (cocaine, cannabis, heroin, amphetamine and amphetamine-like, etc.). According to biological samples, JWH-073, MDPV, AM-694, mephedrone and, very recently, AB-FUBINACA have been detected in blood and urine samples.

- In Italy, **a database has been set up** in English language **to share information about NPS** with project partners.

- Partners from Slovenia and Croatia also took part to a **study visit in Italy**, meeting organizational realities long operating within the Italian EWS and with a high capacity for identification and recognition of NPS in the laboratory and among Law Enforcement, and for treatment of NPS related poisonings in emergency departments. That was an opportunity for the acquisition of know-how and to exchange experiences and operational protocols useful for all national EWS involved.

- A **project website** has been created where deliverables and information materials are uploaded: http://www.dss.unifi.it/vp-107-i-see.html

4. Voices from project partners

"*The I-SEE project represents an added value for the whole European Union as it allows to strengthen information exchange on NPS among neighboring countries and ease Law Enforcement activities and cooperation both within the country and among countries*", declared Elisabetta Bertol, coordinator of the project, from the University of Florence (Italy). "*The project takes advantage of national EWS experiences and good practice exchanges and is improving effectiveness of the European EWS for the sake of all Member States. More specifically, with reference material distribution and with new analytical protocols defined by the University of Florence, the ability to identify NPS will now increase in our own countries and thus increase the sensitivity of national and EU EWS. In addition, the time to make a diagnosis in the presence of an NPS related intoxication will be reduced and faster intervention to treat patients and save their lives will be possible*".

Ada Hočevar Grom, responsible for the partner National Institute of Public Health Slovenia, pointed out, "*In the framework of I-SEE project, we have carried out education on the problem of NPS for public health experts, representatives of NGOs and police. We also established Early Warning Systems (EWS) in eight Slovenian regions. In addition to that, 5 new info-points have been established in 5 Slovenian cities, where users can bring NPS samples for testing. By this, we enabled faster detection of NPS in individual regions as well as faster reaction in case of emergence of NPS. Introduction of regional EWS has already proven as very useful, for member of Maribor EWS detected a phenomenon of methamphetamine in January this year. In the year 2016, we will strengthen information exchange on NPS between Slovenia, Croatia and Italy and establish a NPS database in the framework of I-SEE project."*

Simona Sabic and Mina Pas from the DrogArt Association added "*From our point of view, as a NGO, the I-SEE project is an important opportunity to upgrade existing NGO programs in different Slovenian regions and get better insight in the NPS use patterns in different local areas, in order to effectively respond to NPS emergence, new drug use patterns and risks connected with their use. Besides that, it helped to improve information, knowledge and good practice exchange among professionals, working with drug users in different organizations and institutions on local, regional and national level.*"

The increasing availability of NPS in Croatia probably causes serious health related consequences, including fatalities, which are currently not possible to monitor, register nor prevent. Laboratories in the health system are unable to detect NPS in biological samples and therefore percentages of NPS-related acute intoxications and deaths are completely unknown. Moreover, health care professionals are unaware of this growing problem and there is a lack of knowledge about the health effects related to the use of NPS", stated Marija Definis Gojanović from the University of Split (Croatia). *"It is therefore essential to set*

up an effective mechanism in clinical settings that would include creating a network of all stakeholders, with a main center for strategic development, skill building and supervision. The clinical-toxicological network of the Croatian EWS would not only serve for the purpose of detecting NPS intoxications and monitoring health consequences attributed to their use, but would also aim to improve medical care of intoxicated persons and raise awareness of policy makers regarding the proportions and adverse effects of the NPS phenomenon".