

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement of the Head of the Czech Delegation, Minister of Health of the Czech Republic, Dr. Svatopluk Němeček¹ at 59th CND, Vienna, 14th March 2016

Please notice: details may change; the minister is used to following the text rather loosely and to improvising on the topics/speaking extemporaneously

Dear honourable Chair, dear Ministers, dear Excellences, dear friends and colleagues!

Thank you for giving me, as a representative of the Czech Republic, the opportunity to address this important meeting of the global community. This year, on top of the usual CND agenda, **we are expected to achieve a meaningful, strong consensus that will herald the expected outcome of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs** (also known as UNGASS 2016) that is to be held this April in New York.

The Czech Republic fully aligns itself with the statement delivered by the delegation of the Netherlands on behalf of the European Union.

We all know that **the Special Session is being held at the request of several countries**, which feel deep concern regarding the ability of the international community to achieve the goals and aims set by the 2009 Political Declaration and the Plan of Action. We also know that **we face a situation of escalated violence and an extreme death toll, which is directly related to the so-called War on Drugs** – a war that failed a long time ago.

I feel we are obliged to do our best to **address the concerns of the countries that called for the special session of the UN General Assembly**. We should not fail to help the numerous countries suffering because the War on Drugs was exported to them in its most violent form.

¹ pronounce as “Nyemetschek,” please

The Czech Republic is a devoted supporter of the **principles of a rational and effective drug policy oriented** towards human rights and public health and based on scientific evidence and best practice.

The Czech Republic has experimented with different flavours of its national drug policy since 1990. *Inter alia*, **we depenalised the use of drugs** in 1990. **We also decriminalised the possession of drugs for personal use** in 1990; it is a misdemeanour that is punished by penalties ranging from a warning through to a fine. And after a quarter a century, we can provide conclusive evidence that depenalisation and decriminalisation do work.

If you are interested in more details and more countries that took the same path, **let me invite you to the side event that the Czech Republic is co-sponsoring today.**

Our drug policy rests on four pillars: prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and law enforcement. Each of them is seen as one of four tools of equal importance. All four pillars are there to achieve our primary aim: the welfare of our citizens, and all people.

We have some results to show, based on verifiable data:

- we have the **lowest number of fatal drug overdoses per capita globally;**
- we are in the small group of countries with the **globally lowest prevalence of HIV and AIDS among injecting drug users;**
- we have a **uniquely low prevalence of viral hepatitis C and B among drug injectors** – probably the lowest globally;
- **organised violent drug crime is virtually non-existent** in the Czech Republic;
- last but not least, **thanks to harm reduction services, some 85% of our problem drug users are in regular contact with helping institutions.** This allows for **much earlier entry into abstinence-oriented treatment** and for high recovery rates. In this area – and in many other areas of drug policy – **the role of non-governmental organisations has been immensely positive and completely irreplaceable.** There are things civil society does much better and more cheaply than any government in the world, and it is the approach of my government to use this fact for the good of the community, and the nation.

The data I just showed mean that the Czech Republic is **a country with comparatively very low social and economic costs of illicit drugs**. It is not because the Czech Republic is a drug-free country. It is because we have done our best to make the Czech Republic a country where the harms related to drugs are as low as possible. To minimise the use of drugs is one way to do it, and we have used it, together with other ones.

Each novel aspect of our drug policy was carefully evaluated using rigorous scientific methodology – and when we were not successful in some aspects of these moves, we went back and tried to fix it. And evaluated it again.

(SHORT PAUSE)

This is the experience we offer. As you would expect, we **also have some expectations** regarding the output documents; let me list the three most essential for us.

The first is the problem of the death penalty. It is our long-standing conviction that neither humans nor human institutions have the right to kill people intentionally – if for no other reason than because humans are fallible. The evidence shows that miscarriages of justice are even more common for drug offences than in most other areas of the law. Thus, we decidedly require that in the output document the unacceptability of the death penalty for drug offences is clearly stated.

Second, and closely related, is the proportionality of sentences.

Proportionality is an important principle in effectively implementing the provisions of the UN drug control conventions and its main objective, “to promote the health and welfare of humankind”. Not only do disproportionate penalties destroy the sense of justice in each particular country. They often bring adverse side effects such as criminalisation, stigma, and social exclusion, so that well-being is heavily affected. In today’s interconnected world, the **death penalty and proportionality in sentencing are international problems** – and must be reflected like this in the UNGASS outcome document.

The third is the importance of harm reduction. There is conclusive scientific evidence that harm reduction saves lives, improves public health and public safety, and leads to immense savings in terms of the economic and social costs. It is extremely important that we state this in the UNGASS outcome document so that it provides unambiguous guidance for effective drug policies.

We are fully aware that drug policy is a complex area and also incorporates intangibles that science is not able to quantify or assess: *exempli gratia*, religious and other values. However, there are also **universal values** that constitute the very fundamentals of the United Nations and we cannot ignore them at UNGASS 2016.

We agree that it is undesirable to abolish the UN treaties on drugs – they have to stay as the foundation of the whole system. However, if we demand “more of the same” from the countries no matter if it has demonstrably failed, we will not only deeply disappoint those who asked for a ***special*** summit at the highest UN level – **we will risk the very existence of the international drug control system.**

There is still a lot of work ahead of us before we have a meaningful UNGASS output document. We suggest that whenever we feel as if we are at a dead end, we should go back to the origins of the current drug control regime: the protection of human wellbeing.

In the view of the Czech Republic, no outcome document at all would be better than a weak outcome document for UNGASS 2016. We would consider promoting a weak document that repeats the old stereotypes far too risky. It would be better to stay silent in recognition of our failure, to learn from it, and to try better looking forward to 2019.

But that is not inevitable. If we work intensely with clear minds and hearts this week, we won't need to remain silent – we would have a strong document to steer us into a better future. That is my most sincere hope and wish.

Thank you for your attention.