Bosnia Drugs Misery

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Drug-addiction in Bosnia is fast becoming a serious problem

Where artillery once boomed out over Sarajevo, the night air now resounds with ear-splitting pop music played for joyous teenagers dancing in a drug-fuelled frenzy.

Fifteen-year-olds trade pills imprinted with bunnies "to

make you horny" or hearts "to make you love the world". The pills, costing 10 German marks, are washed down with beer at three marks a glass. This is a typical Friday night at a popular Sarajevo night-club.

In the days of Marshal Tito, Yugoslavia never saw anything like this. Drug taking was rare. Then came the Bosnian war which brought misery and drove people under bombardment to seek escape in narcotics.

After that the post-war hardships, a poorly organised police force and an incompetent, corrupt judiciary combined to produce a huge increase in drug taking and trafficking. Aggravating the problem was a heavy flow of narcotics transiting through Balkans to Western countries.

A student at the Sarajevo Art Academy, who asked not to be named, summed up the scene, "People can't relax without drugs anymore. Weed! It's everywhere at the clubs. Its like it's not illegal anymore. They don't hide it." She hasn't tried the designer pills or the stronger, more expensive white ecstasy tablets. She's a social marijuana smoker.

Having lost two friends to heroin she doesn't touch it herself. One died of an overdose during the war. The other, a teenage dealer, was shot five years ago at the local vegetable market for not paying his supplier.

Another friend recently sold his walkman, video player and paintings to support his heroin habit. "Now he has nothing," the student said. "Young people are just unhappy here and want to leave Sarajevo. Most of them are interested only in getting high."

She explained that most adults are either unaware how big the drug problem is or else they close their eyes to it. She never sees police at the rave clubs, just bouncers who check for guns.

The deputy director of Bosnia's INTERPOL office, Mirela Leko, told IWPR that according to police statistics, the country is not a major consumer of drugs compared with other states. But trafficking through Bosnia is sharply on the increase.

According to INTERPOL, 80 per cent of the heroin seized in Western Europe in 1999 came from Turkey via the Balkan route, largely controlled by the Albanian, Kosovo, and Turkish mafia. In addition, say police, Bosnian criminals have moved in on the trade.

Only about 65 per cent of Bosnia's frontiers are controlled by the border police. The rest is wide open to smugglers. Drug-trafficking is especially heavy on routes which run through the Republika Srpska cities of
Trebinje in the south and Banja Luka in the northwest, and routes along the Sava river border with Croatia.

Although drug taking in Bosnia so far is relatively low by international standards it is now increasing "at an exponential rate", said Mladen Milosavljevic, a crime expert with Bosnia's federal ministry for internal affairs.

The undermanned police force treats possession of narcotics in small amounts not as a crime but as a minor offence meriting a small symbolic fine. Large amounts can bring a charge of dealing. But the definition of "large amounts" is vague. One man found with 2000 pills, half of them ecstasy tablets, was let off after claiming he was a heavy user.

Bosnian youth are the main targets for dealers. Dr Nermana Basara, neuropsychiatrist and director of the Sarajevo canton's Public Institute for Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, estimates about 30 per cent of Bosnians aged between 14 and 18 take drugs.

A small box of powder called Oxygen is where it starts. It's handed out free to youngsters who enjoy the stimulation and clamour for more. After a while they go on to heavier drugs.

Police and medical authorities now realise that Bosnian narcotics consumption could be heading for European levels. With limited resources, they are directing more and more attention to drug-related crime, to school drop-outs, the increase in unwanted pregnancies along with AIDS, suicides and fatal overdoses.

Narcotics use is no longer limited to the capital, Sarajevo. Zenica, Mostar, Banja Luka, Trebinje and Tuzla are catching up. Experts blame the post-war uncertainties, displacement of families, the transition to a free market economy, the growing influence of the West, and just plain boredom.

Despite high unemployment, people still find the money for drugs. "When you're hooked you make sure you get money from somewhere," said a recovering addict who wanted to be identified only as Gordan. "It might be from casual jobs, from dealing or from stealing."

Gordan started with marijuana during his compulsory year in the Yugoslav army in 1988. Bored with university life after military service, he dropped out and took a job as a pizza waiter in the Sarajevo suburb of Ilidza. He became depressed from smoking too much marijuana and moved on to heroin. When the war broke out, he left the country, travelling around Germany, France, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. During this time, his habit worsened.

Gordan returned to post-war Sarajevo in 1996, and vowed to get clean. He worked as a photo-journalist but nearly died in a 17-hour-drug-induced coma after taking ecstasy, heroin, and a couple of boxes of sedatives. At the end of 1998, he spent two years in a Catholic-run rehabilitation commune, deprived of drugs, music, TV and women. His days were filled with prayer, manual labour, and discussions with other junkies.

Now, Gordan claims he has been clean for six months and enjoys a steady job as a salesman. Gordan's father, who started a drug addicts support group in 1998, is trying to heighten official awareness of drug hazards. He seems to be having some success.

"Generally in the past, the government and health policy-makers didn't care a lot about drugs but now they see the number of addicts climbing they have started to sit up and take notice," Basara said.
Her substance abuse clinic, a local out-patient centre for drug addicts and alcoholics, still remains the only clinic of its kind in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the rest of the country, drug addicts are still treated in psychiatric wards.

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**Location:** Balkans
- Macedonia
- Albania
- Turkey

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