

Bosnia Struggles With Wave of Drug Addiction

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The few centres that the government has set up to treat the country's mainly youthful addicts are increasingly overwhelmed.

Sitting in a clinic, Dalibor's body looks exhausted and ill, while his eyes display a strange glow. For six years he's been fighting drug addiction, which has become a problem of epidemic proportions in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

"My friends were on drugs and so I joined the club. I injected heroin with a needle the first time I took it," he said. "I never thought I would become an addict."

As Dalibor admitted, addiction led quickly to a life of crime. "Theft is a daily routine for every drug addict," he said. "I had no option but to steal when I had no money to buy drugs with. I sold stuff from my house so that I could buy heroin."

After six years of addiction, a couple of overdoses and the deaths of five friends, Dalibor decided to seek medical treatment.

According to the Sarajevo canton's Public Institute for Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, there are up to 100,000 addicts of various sorts in a population of barely 4 million. Most are young, with an average age of 25.

In the communist era, drug-taking was confined to a tiny urban minority. But then came the war in Bosnia between 1992-1995, along with mass killings, large-scale forced migration and the virtual collapse of the economy. Aggravating the problem was an increasing flow of narcotics through Balkans to western countries.

The limited capacity of the country's psychiatric clinics, charged with treating drug addicts, is another problem, as the number of addicts and drug-related deaths in the country rises steadily.

"Capacities are very poor," said the institute for substance abuse's director, Nermana Mehic Basara. "This is the only place where addicts can get treatment in Sarajevo."

Many patients cannot wait for free treatment at the institute, leaving them no choice but to seek help in expensive, privately-owned establishments, such as the La Vita clinic in eastern Sarajevo.

Dalibor is among them. He claims to have made significant progress during his two-month treatment at La Vita.

"I feel good today and no longer see anyone from the lot I used to do drugs with," he said. "I want to get a job. I would never have made it this far without my family's support."

The hardest part for the patients often comes after the therapy has finished and they have to return to

daily life. Drug addiction is not an issue that many people wish to tackle in Bosnia and former addicts are widely shunned.

Samir Ibisevic, chairman of a Sarajevo-based association that helps drug addicts reintegrate into society, says, "You lose your status completely after becoming a drug addict and it takes a lot of time to regain it."

Mehic Basara says society in Bosnia strongly discriminates against drug addicts, even when they are cured.

"People are reluctant to socialise with current or former addicts because of the many prejudices about them," she said. "These prejudices need to be fought by all means available."

But one obstacle is that the suspicions at the back of many people's minds - that most former addicts will return to drug-taking - are not wholly unjustified.

Basara admits that 70 to 80 per cent of the addicts who undergo basic medical treatment return to taking drugs at some point.

The Sarajavo institute encourages patients to contact local authorities and other institutions to find out about any programmes they have to re-integrate treated drug addicts. The institute lacks the resources to run such projects on its own.

Basara says that the Sarajevo canton's health ministry, the institute's sponsor, had promised to build a residential centre for patients needing aftercare but no date has been fixed.

The Bosnian government currently pays for the basic medical treatment of drug addicts but does not support any post-treatment programmes. The non-governmental organisations helping treated addicts, therefore, have to rely only on foreign aid.

Dalibor is still undergoing treatment at La Vita and in the meantime is looking for a job. "I'll take anything," he said, having admitted that all his efforts so far had been in vain.

"It is very important for a cured addict to be accepted by society and find a job," Nemanja Mikavica, chairman of the Parents' Association Against Drug Abuse, said. "Former addicts who are accepted by society don't go back to doing drugs."

His association has helped send 65 addicts to various residential centres, which are widely seen as beneficial for ex-addicts trying to ease themselves back into society.

"Drug addicts change their habits and ways of thinking in such therapeutic communes," he said. "They are given the chance to learn various skills and discover their hidden talents."

The staff at La Vita staff agree that re-integration into society is crucial.

"At that point, the most important thing is to give treated addicts something to do so that they don't go

back to doing drugs,” Branka Zagajac Gavrilovic, a psychiatrist at La Vita said.

Dalibor is convinced he has given up his addiction for good. “Drug abuse leads to certain death,” he said. “They have already stolen so much of my life.”

Natalija Lasica produced this article as part of her IWPR primary level journalism course.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Serbia

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable
Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bosnia-struggles-wave-drug-addiction>