

Appeal to the governments in South East Europe

On the occasion of 26th June, the United Nations' International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, as part of the **Support Don't Punish** campaign's 'Global Day of Action', the Drug Policy Network South East Europe and its member organisations appeal to the governments in countries of the region to ensure that people who use drugs are safe from discrimination and enjoy care which is needed.

The **Support Don't Punish** global campaign calls for changes to existing drug laws, for the decriminalisation of low-level, non-violent drug offences, and for investments in effective and cost-effective harm reduction responses for people who use drugs. The campaign was launched in 2013, and has grown year-on-year.

The 'war on drugs', declared 50 years ago, has failed to reduce drug use and has led to serious negative consequences – such as overdose deaths, HIV and hepatitis C infections among people who use drugs, prison over-crowding, severe human rights violations, and an exacerbation of stigma, marginalisation, violence and corruption. Instead, we need drug policies that are meaningfully grounded in human rights, and that aim to address the health and social vulnerabilities faced by people who use drugs instead of exacerbating them

The coronavirus pandemic that hit the World last year caused additional problems the these populations. There has been a decline in the availability of drug services, especially during the first two months of the pandemic, both those providing treatment and those providing harm reduction interventions. Drug services have largely been affected in similar ways to other frontline health services, with some providers forced to close down or restrict access.

Our organisations, the service providers, have identified a number of specific new COVID-19-related challenges. These include: accessing sufficient personal protective equipment for staff; informing and educating clients about COVID-19 risks; managing infected clients and concerns about staff vulnerability to infection; helping more marginalised clients to access essential hygiene-related services; challenges linked to the use of remote technology (phone and video); staffing shortages; problems enrolling new clients and managing the demand for substitution treatment; and the need to mitigate potential risks of unintended consequences associated with rapidly implemented adaptations to normal working practices.

It is time to leave behind harmful politics, ideology and prejudice and to prioritise health and human rights over incarceration and futile efforts to achieve a 'drug-free world. It is time to support, and not punish people who use drugs and other non-violent drug offenders.