

NEWSLETTER

AUGUST- OCTOBER 2015

DRUG POLICY NETWORK SOUTH EAST EUROPE



Foundation of Drug Policy Network in South East Europe
DPNSEE



UNGASS 2016 and its significance for South East Europe



News from the organizations of the Network



Civil Society Forum meeting in Brussels



Meeting of young people in Tirana, Albania



International Harm Reduction Conference 2015
From Malaysia with Inspiration

Foundation of Drug Policy Network in South East Europe (DPNSEE)



Thirteen non-governmental organizations of the SEE region founded the Umbrella Organization "**Drug Policy Network in South East Europe**". The organization acquired legal status by registering in the register of the competent authority (Business Registers Agency) in Belgrade. The organization is called in English 'Drug Policy Network South East Europe' with the abbreviation **DPNSEE**. The registration of the network as a legal entity was one of the main objectives of the project "Strengthening NGO capacity and promoting public health and human rights oriented drug policy in South East Europe". Founding members of the DPNSEE are 13 organizations from SEE countries: Aktion Plus (Albania), Margina (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Viktorija (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Healthy Options Skopje (HOPS), (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Diogenis (Greece), Positive Voice (Greece), Center for Life (Greece), NGO 4life (Montenegro), Juventas (Montenegro), RHRN (Romania), ALIAT (Romania), Prevent (Serbia) and SEEA.NET (Slovenia).

The DPNSEE will be responsible for coordinating the Network. The Board of the organization consists of 7 members elected by the general meeting of the members which is the Network's highest decision-making body. The founding General Assembly elected the first Board and approved the action plan for 2016.

Priorities for 2016 are:

1. Strengthening the organizational structure and governance of the Network
2. The organization of the office and staff recruitment
3. The tightening of links with the state authorities, institutions and agencies responsible for implementing the drug policy in SE Europe countries and
4. The implementation of initiatives and actions in specific priority areas, such as:
 - a) Harm reduction and treatment programs
 - b) Drug law reform in collaboration with the scientific community
 - c) Developments in drug policy in the EU and internationally and the involvement of NGOs in decision making
 - d) Capacity building through training opportunities for members of the Network
 - e) Networking through the media, communication with the press and the DPNSEE website

We hope that the European Commission and co-financing institutions will continue their financial support to the Network and its member-organizations for the better functioning of the DPNSEE and the implementing of their actions.

Association Diogenis

GREECE

Association Diogenis participated in the 3rd National Meeting on "AIDS & Hepatitis"

The 3rd National Meeting on "AIDS & Hepatitis" was held in Athens for the third consecutive time from 17-19 September 2015. This meeting was co-organized by the Department of Hygiene, Epidemiology & Medical Statistics of Athens University and many other bodies. The meeting aims at a comprehensive approach to HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis in our country, dedicating time to the real problems faced by health professionals in their everyday practice, patients, public health authorities and the general public.

Association Diogenis participated in the meeting with great pleasure and honor. Diogenis' Director Mr. Apostolou, was asked to give a lecture on "Current developments in the drug policy". Significant data concerning the origin and evolution of the international drug control system were presented. More specifically, some of the issues described were: the geopolitical and economic environment of the 18th and 19th century and the contemporary geopolitical choices mainly those by big countries, the scientific developments (especially those in pharmacology after the 19th century) and the social and cultural perceptions about the use of psychoactive substances. All of them were and are key factors that have decisively shaped the drug control system as we know it today. Also, reference was made to the efforts of the international community to effectively address the problem and the developments that have taken place over the last decade. The inadequacy of international treaties to achieve the objectives set was highlighted, as the efforts to implement those goals have not been achieved, a fact particularly evident from the immense gap between what it has been officially defined and the everyday reality. Finally, reference was made to the forthcoming Special Session on drugs of the General Assembly of the United Nations due to take place in April 2016. Mr. Apostolou emphasized the importance of this meeting and said it would be a success if there will be agreement upon the following: the member states who want to experiment to be able to do so, to give priority to health and respect for human rights and to stop preventing the availability and access of opioids and other essential medicines to people who really need them as painkillers.

The speech ended with an appeal to the government and the New Greek parliament. "Greece should have an approved, both by the government and parliament, Strategy and Action Plan on Drugs as soon as possible. There is already a draft Strategy and Action plan, which can be approved following some additions and changes."



ALIAT

ROMANIA

Open Letter by NGO ALIAT regarding recent incident of unethical medical practice

On the occasion of a recent incident in Zalau, Romania, NGO Aliat “Alliance for Fight against Alcoholism and Drug addiction”, addressed an open letter to Dr. Nicholas Bănicioiu, the Health Minister of Romania and Quaestor Sorin Oprea, the director of the National Anti-drug Agency (NAA), in order to draw attention regarding this event of unethical medical practice.

More specifically, three youngsters arrived in the emergency room after they had supposedly made use of psychoactive substances and physicians who offered medical assistance not only called the police to intervene, but also took biological samples from the young patients. According to the press, this denunciation on the part of the doctors resulted in an inquiry by the Department for Combating Organized Crime and also a referral to Salaj school, where the youngsters are studying.

Considering that the use of psychoactive substances is not an offense according to the Romanian law, NGO Aliat highlighted that such behaviours performed by the medical personnel violate medical confidentiality and professional ethics. Moreover, incidents like these discourage people from accessing emergency rooms or other health care services in a state of potentially fatal intoxication out of fear of police involvement, especially when – according to NAA statistics – Romania is facing a growing number of drug-related overdose cases and deaths. Another point highlighted by this open letter was the need for the establishment of a clear reporting procedure that would neither violate human rights nor criminalize people using drugs when they are in need of health care.

The Drug Policy Network of South East Europe indicates its support towards this intervention on the part of NGO Aliat. For more information, please contact: Dr. Eugen Hriscu, Scientific Director of ALIAT.



Aksion Plus

ALBANIA

Meeting of young people in Tirana, Albania

NGO Aksion Plus (Albania), in collaboration with YODA and Drug Policy Dialogue in South East Europe network, organised a meeting in Tirana, Albania, from 8th to 10th of August 2015. Participating organizations and individuals were: Aksion Plus, Albania (host) - Healthy Options Project Skopje, Macedonia - Labirynt, Kosovo - Plug INN, Belgium - Re Generation, Serbia - Students' Drug Policy Initiative, Poland - Dimitar Karagegov, YODA's individual member from Bulgaria - Aksion Plus staff, volunteers and beneficiaries.

The main aim of this meeting was the exchange of experience concerning the current drug policy and projects under or due to implementation, as well as the cooperation in order to form draft plans for future actions and interventions among the different countries of the region. An overview concerning the actual drug policy in Albania and the related gaps and difficulties was presented. Participants discussed on the current drug policy situation and developments in the countries of South Eastern Europe, running projects and plans for future collaboration at international, national and regional level.

Other topics discussed were: the preparations for the UNGASS in April 2016, the contribution from non-governmental agencies in close collaboration with respective governments and other key stakeholders, YODA involvement in UNGASS preparation thus far, and also future plans for the 57th Session of the CND in Vienna 2016 and UNGASS including national advocacy campaigns, side-events, youth manifesto, collaboration with SSDP both at international and national level. The most important subjects raised were: party-working and harm reduction for recreational drug and alcohol; barriers in providing harm reduction services to underage people; advocacy at the domestic level; plans for advocacy campaigns at the international level – European Union and United Nations in particular.

Finally, a workshop with Aksion Plus staff, volunteers and beneficiaries took place. The workshop involved advocacy interventions in order to improve the quality of services in their cities.



Development of synergies on youth and drug related issues – Aksion Plus (Albania)

Aksion Plus implements various initiatives in cooperation with different donors and partners. Since 2015, Aksion Plus – in collaboration with YMCA – implements the project “Youth Voice Campaign”, a regional and world initiative of UNFPA on youth activism and leadership. As part of this project a group of young people was trained in order to identify the most vulnerable and at risk young populations and to advocate effectively towards the local government. More information is being published in both partners' websites, social media and in the official UNFPA website. Moreover, in order to better address the needs of more people and different target groups, Aksion Plus collaborated with other NGOs and public institutions, for example the national NGO ACPD working with the LGBT community and sex workers.

Festival "Addicted to Life, Prevention - Treatment - Reintegration"

From September 27-29, 2015, a festival was held in Athens by the Hellenic Organization Against Drugs – OKANA. This action was organized in the context of a wider addiction awareness campaign across the country under the slogan "Addicted to Life" with emphasis on three principles: "Prevention - Treatment - Reintegration." The festival consisted of several activities with informative and artistic content, such as: music concerts, exhibitions of the artistic creations created by members of the therapeutic programs, theatrical performances, happenings and workshops.

Association Diogenis participated at this festival in cooperation with the NGOs: PRAKSIS, the Greek Association of People living with HIV «Positive Voice», «Center for Life» for the support of people living with HIV/AIDS, the Hellenic Liver Patients Association «Prometheus» and the Greek Drug & Substitute Users Union. The aforementioned NGOs informed the public about their activities and distributed informational material. Especially for this festival, a special informational leaflet was created along with stickers concerning the support and protection of the rights of people who use psychoactive substances, such as: the right to work, the right to protection of human life, the right to family, the active participation in decisions, the access to health services, the observance of medical confidentiality, the right to freedom, the respect of personality, the right to equal treatment, the right to choice of treatment and healthcare and the right for a life free from discrimination and stigma. Finally, there was a presentation of the video created by NGOs Praksis, Association Diogenis and the Greek Drug & Substitute Users Union Association for the International Day against Drugs, under the global campaign 'Support. Don't Punish', as well as presentation of a documentary on drug consumption rooms created by the Greek Drug & Substitute Users Union Association.

The Hellenic Organization against Drugs – OKANA implemented this festival under the Act «Awareness Campaign for addictions» funded by the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) 2007-2013.



Letter of the Greek Platform on drug related issues to the Ministry of Health

Letter to the General Secretary of the Health Ministry on the “Elimination of the waiting list and the direct access of drug users in treatment - substitution programs”

On October 26, 2015, Greek NGOS addressed a letter to Mr. John Baskozos – General Secretary of the Health Ministry, by which the signatory NGOs - Association «Diogenis», PRAKSIS, Greek Association of People living with HIV «Positive Voice», «Center for Life» for the support of people living with HIV/AIDS, Hellenic Liver Patients Association «Prometheus» and the Greek Drug & Substitute Users Union - welcome his statement concerning the elimination of the waiting list within the next year and the direct access of drug users in treatment/substitution programs provided by the Hellenic Organization Against Drugs. With this letter, the organizations are stressing the need for such interventions and declare their support for the initiative. As representatives of civil society, the NGOs remain vigilant as far as the implementation of the promises made by the state is concerned, while ensuring that the quality of the provided services is going to be maintained at the necessary quality levels for the needs of all beneficiaries.

Civil Society Forum meeting in Brussels

The Civil Society Forum (CSF) had its annual meeting in Brussels on October 5 and 6. The forum is a broad platform of 45 representatives of organizations from EU countries working in the field of drugs. The CSF discusses drug policy issues with the European Commission and the Horizontal Drugs Group (HDG) where all EU member states are represented.

The meeting elected a new core group that coordinates the activities of the forum and decided to form 4 thematic working groups.

- The first working group will work on minimum quality standards for demand reduction, a topic that has been discussed by the forum in the previous years. The result of that work was a paper with a set of recommendations, several of which were included in the EU Council's conclusions about the same subject.

- The second working group will focus on civil society engagement at the national level. This working group will make an analysis of the current state of play with regard to civil society engagement in national policy, describe linkages between national and EU structures, identify models which are currently implemented and will describe examples of good practices. The working group will make concrete recommendations for ensuring effective Civil Society engagement at a national level

- The third working group will work on civil society input for the mid-term evaluation of the EU Drug Strategy (2013-2020) and its Action Plan

(2013-16), as well as for the preparation of the new Action Plan on Drugs (2017-2020). The European Commission has asked an external evaluator, to assess the existing drug strategy and action plan.

- The last working group will work on the communication between the Forum and the institutions of the EU and the UN, in order to ensure that civil society voices get heard by decision-makers. The UNGASS will be for this year the main focus of the working group.

The discussion with representatives of the commission and the HDG were positive. The role of NGOs in EU policy making is growing and their active participation in consultations, presentations of policy papers and contacts with the commission and the member states makes them an important partner in shaping the drug policy of the EU.



UNGASS 2016 and its significance for South East Europe

From October 1-3, 2015 a Regional meeting of NGOs, policy makers and scientists/researchers from the countries of Southeast Europe, was organized by Diogenis Association in Belgrade, to discuss about the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Drugs (April 2016) and its significance for South East Europe

The purpose of the meeting was:

- To inform the participants about the preparations for the special session and the topics proposed for discussion.
- To Provide an opportunity for policy makers, NGOs and persons from the scientific community to exchange ideas about issues relating to the Special Session. The meeting would also be used to identify items of concern and reflect on the importance of the expected outcomes of the Special Session for the countries of Southeastern Europe.

The program of the meeting focused on four key points:

- a. A brief update on the preparations for the Special Session by the UN Commission on Narcotic drugs
- b. The contribution of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and other UN agencies (World Health Organisation, the UN Programme for Development (UNDP), the UN programme on HIV/AIDS and the UN Commission on Human Rights)
- c. The preparations on the level of the European Union
- d. The Contribution of NGOs and
- e. The challenges and possible proposals for the future drug policy

The meeting was attended by representatives of government agencies responsible for policy, specialized scientists, professionals working in non-governmental organisations that provide services to drug users and dependent persons and do advocacy work on human rights.

The participants hailed the initiative of the UN Member States, the international organizations, civil society and in particular the NGOs to discuss and openly debate key issues concerning the drugs phenomenon. Important is the idea of the assessment of the current drug control system and its achievements and the call of several states to openly discuss reforms of the system.

The meeting closed with the formulation of some conclusions relevant for the situation in the SEE countries (see text Statement of the meeting on "The UNGASS 2016 and its significance for SEE", Belgrade, 1-3 October 2015)



Statement of the meeting on “The UNGASS 2016 and its significance for SEE”

The participants express their appreciation for the initiative of the UN Member States, the international organizations, civil society and in particular, the NGOs to discuss and openly debate key issues concerning the drugs phenomenon. It is important that the UNGASS includes besides the review of progress in the implementation of the political declaration 2009, the “assessment of the achievements and challenges in countering the world drug problem, within the framework of the three international drug control conventions and other relevant United Nations instruments.” The outcomes of the UNGASS should give a new impetus to the renewal of drug policies and practices in the world.

The political, economic and social situation in SEE countries makes it difficult to develop a coherent, comprehensive and workable drug policy. Drugs do not get the required priority on the political agenda of the countries in the region. The treatment of users, despite efforts in recent years to shift the focus from a punitive approach to an approach towards public health and respect for human rights, remains a responsibility of criminal justice with all the consequences of marginalization, stigma and social exclusion. In the countries of South East Europe, a large percentage of people who use drugs is imprisoned with no prospect of social integration. While scientific research and practical experience show that the inclusion of drug users and drug dependent people in harm reduction and treatment programs, is more effective and cheaper, governments do not adequately support these alternatives. On the contrary, in most countries, the providers of harm reduction services become less and in many cases, services are closing due to lack of funding. Organised crime and corruption related to drug trafficking is a huge problem in countries of the region located on trafficking routes for drugs, weapons and human beings. Cooperation with the international community to counter these problems is necessary.

Participants propose that the Special Session on Drugs provides guidelines and commits the Member States to implement the following issues:

1. UN Member States commit themselves to put into practice the constantly repeated principle of a balanced approach between demand and supply reduction. For the countries in Southeast Europe this means that priority must be given to resource allocation for harm reduction programs and strengthening prevention, treatment and social integration.

2. The criminalization of drug users has proved to be counterproductive and harmful to society and individuals and should be repealed. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime mentions in the document “Drug policy provisions from the international drug control” that «International Conventions do not necessarily require the punishment for possession, purchase or cultivation of drugs for personal use.» The Special Session should take a clear position and define the framework within which the member countries can address the decriminalization of drug users.

3. Harm reduction programs are recognized in strategic documents on drugs in most countries of Southeast Europe, but this recognition is not transposed in state legislation. Integration of harm reduction (including distribution and exchange of syringes and supervised consumption rooms) into national legislation is needed.

4. The use of so-called new psychoactive substances by young people is a priority and has to be addressed effectively. Training and education, along with the promotion of a healthy life style has to be supported.

5. Cannabis is the main substance used by young people. Cannabis as a prohibited substance is a matter of controversy. More and more countries make a distinction between cannabis and other psychotropic substances. Some countries have introduced legislation on cannabis. The Special Session on Drugs of 2016 cannot ignore these developments and should provide guidelines to address it. South East European countries face illicit production and trafficking of cannabis which have to be solved.

6. The meeting in Belgrade identified the lack of treatment programmes for minors who use opioid drugs. It is an issue that needs immediate intervention especially for certain population groups in the countries of SE Europe.

The international community has the opportunity at the forthcoming Special Session of the UN General Assembly in 2016 to propose a framework of principles which will enable Member States and civil society to conduct meaningful dialogue on drugs accompanied by the application of methods and programs that have proven to be effective. The new social conditions and challenges require policies and legislation that are consistent with scientific knowledge, promotion of a healthy life styles and respect for fundamental human rights.

Belgrade, October 2, 2015

International Harm Reduction Conference 2015 From Malaysia with Inspiration

From 18-22 October 2015, the International Harm Reduction Conference was held. After the last successful conference in 2013 in Lithuania, Harm Reduction International in partnership with the local partner Malaysian AIDS Council organized the 24th event, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The event, opened by the Malaysian Minister of Health, was visited by around 900 participants from over 70 countries all over the world. This year's theme was 'Call for leadership' with many presentations and sessions dedicated to the fact that harm reduction in our times needs leaderships on all levels: on government level and on the levels of community involvement, on advocacy, champions in health service delivery, practice-oriented research and science-based interventions. Other key themes of this year's conference were:

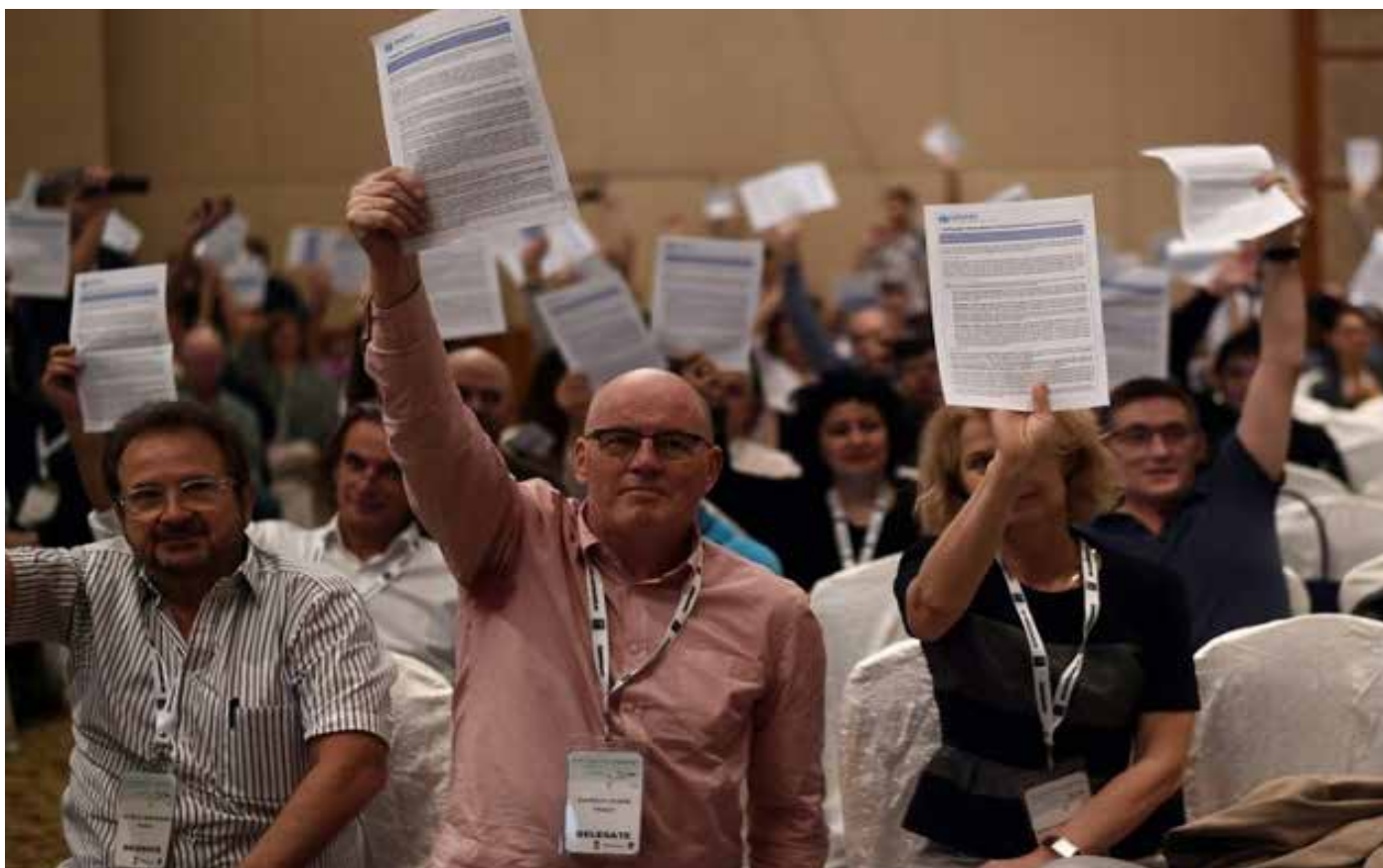
- Funding of harm reduction. The availability of services, like needle and syringe programmes, opioid substitution therapy and health and social services are getting even worse in many parts of the world, due to shifting priorities among international donors and a refusal of many national governments to adequately respond to the health needs of their citizens who use drugs. This situation is also experienced in Central and Eastern Europe and Balkan region. Rather than tackling concentrated epidemics in middle-income countries, the funding priority is now shifting to poorer countries with generalized HIV epidemics. However, the majority of people who inject drugs live in middle income countries (lower middle-income countries such as Ukraine, Pakistan and Vietnam or

upper middle-income countries such as Brazil, Iran, Russia and South Africa). "The idea that middle-income countries should take care of their own is a theory of overseas development systems that seems to focus more on gross national income than on inequality within countries," said Daniel Wolfe of Open Society Foundations. "People who inject drugs are often in 'richer countries' but still aren't getting any services from their government."

- Much attention was paid to the role of advocacy as an essential change agent. In many areas, advocacy can be considered the key of moving harm reduction towards the levels that is required to have adequate impact on the daily lives of all people who use drugs. "Although we talked a lot about behaviour change interventions for our communities and designed excellent interventions to reach out to hard to reach populations such as drug users we never realised the challenge to reach out to the governments and the almost impossible task of changing their behaviours," said Rajiv Kafle of the Global Network of People Living with HIV.

- Another key theme was the increasing call for drug policy reform. With the upcoming UNGASS2016 review of the international drugs conventions coming up soon, lots of attention was paid to the 'reform debate'. An extraordinary example of the inevitable change and of the surreal politics hampering an open debate was the





position paper from UNODC. The key UN agency on Drug Control prepared a paper to clarify the position of the UNODC with a recommendation to decriminalize personal drug possession and low-level drug dealing offences. The paper was distributed by the conference organizers as UNODC and received a big round applause from the audience. (For more info: <http://www.tdpf.org.uk/blog/truth-behind-unodcs-leaked-decriminalisation-paper>)

- Another regional focus of the conference was on compulsory treatment, an often used government response to drug use in many parts of Asia. A report on alternatives to coercive treatment was published during the conference (<http://www.ihra.net/contents/1648>) and a couple of sessions highlighted examples of good practice in community treatment. Several presentations presented Malaysia as an example of regional leadership on issues like government leadership in harm reduction as part of their public health approach towards HIV. Thousands of NSP and OST locations have opened since 2006, and subsequently the spread of bloodborne viruses like HIV and HCV among people who use drugs, has been drastically reduced.

- The Kuala Lumpur Declaration was launched asking governments and agencies to:
- Endorse and adopt harm reduction as a key

principle of drug policy

- Redirect funding for drug policy deliver a global target of a 10% shift in such funding by 2020 at the upcoming UNGASS.
- End the criminalisation of people who use drugs and the punitive legal frameworks that fuel HIV transmission, overdose, incarceration and human rights violations. (More info on <http://www.harmreductiondecade.org/>)
- Deserve special attention, the sessions on harm reduction in conflict areas (like in Myanmar or Ukraine) and harm reduction among migrant and refugee populations.

More information and images on the highlights of the can be seen on: <http://drogriporter.hu/en/kualalumpursessions>

The conference was covered by AIDSMAP: <http://www.aidsmap.com/ihrc2015>

All in all, the IHRC 2015 was a very diverse and extraordinary inspiring and catalyzing conference in a crucial period in time.

John-Peter Kools
Harm Reduction International

Organisations of the SEE Drug Policy Network

ALIAT – Alliance for the Fight Against Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, Romania

Romanian Harm Reduction Network (RHRN), Romania

Aksion Plus, Albania

Healthy Options Project Skopje (HOPS), Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Juventas, Montenegro

The “South Eastern European and Adriatic Addiction Network”, SEEAN, Slovenia

NGO Viktorija, Banja Luka, Bosnia Herzegovina

Association Margina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Association Prevent, Novi Sad, Serbia

Association DIOGENIS, Drug Policy Dialogue in SEE, Greece

Centre for life, Greece

Positive Voice, Greece

NGO 4life, Montenegro

The newsletter is aiming to inform and keep updated organisations, institutions and individuals on drug policy developments along with news in the website and social media of the network. Our plan is to actively involve member organisations to report about their activities and about developments in their countries.

The Newsletter is prepared and published by the Association Diogenis, Drug Policy Dialogue in South East Europe.

Members of the drug policy network feed into the Newsletter following on topics related to criminal justice, social and Health programmes, human rights and events of interest.

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