



The role of youth in transforming drug policy discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are reshaping drug policy discourse by challenging criminalisation frameworks, promoting public health narratives, and engaging peers through activism and participatory research, serving as long-term catalysts for more humane and inclusive policy reform.

Drug policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has traditionally been shaped by a [criminalization-based approach](#), emphasising punishment, legal sanctions, and deterrence. Within this framework, drug users are often portrayed as offenders rather than individuals in need of support. However, global trends are increasingly shifting toward a [public health perspective](#), focusing on prevention, mental health support, rehabilitation, and harm reduction. In this evolving landscape, young people are emerging as key actors in reshaping how drug use and addiction are discussed in society. This blog examines institutional and civil society approaches to drug use in BiH, then analyses the shift toward a public health perspective, and finally evaluates the extent of youth influence on discourse and policy.

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State institutions and civil society approaches

Government-led initiatives in BiH primarily emphasise prevention through awareness and legal education, aiming to inform citizens, especially young people, about the risks and consequences of drug use. These approaches typically rely on [public campaigns](#), such as the 'Choose Life – Not Drugs' campaign organised by the Sarajevo Canton Ministry of Internal Affairs, [school-based programs](#), such as prevention workshops, educational lectures and awareness sessions conducted in primary and secondary schools in cooperation with police officers, psychologists and NGOs and [informational materials](#) including brochures, posters, leaflets, educational guides and online awareness materials distributed by the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and public health institutions, that highlight the health dangers, legal penalties, and social consequences associated with drugs.

However, such initiatives often adopt a top-down communication model, where institutions act as authoritative sources of knowledge and guidance. While this can be effective in delivering clear and consistent messages, it may also limit engagement, as young people are positioned more as passive recipients of information rather than active participants in dialogue. Additionally, the focus on legal consequences reflects the broader criminalisation framework, reinforcing the idea of drug use as a legal violation rather than a complex social and health issue. Although this approach can contribute to raising awareness, it may not fully address underlying factors such as mental health challenges, peer pressure, or socio-economic conditions that influence drug use.

Examples of largely top-down and cautionary approaches include the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Sarajevo Canton with its campaign 'Choose Life – Not Drugs' and the Ministry of Security BiH with its campaign on 'Combating Drug Abuse among Minors in BiH'. These approaches rely on warning messages and deterrence strategies, which may limit open dialogue with young people.

As a result, while state-led prevention efforts play an important role in establishing baseline knowledge and deterrence, their impact can be strengthened by incorporating more interactive, participatory, and health-oriented strategies that resonate more effectively with young audiences.

In contrast, civil society organizations have introduced a more participatory and health-oriented narrative. For example, CARE International Balkans has highlighted youth engagement through initiatives such as 'Message from the Youth of Mostar: Choose Life, Not Drugs'. Likewise, PROMENTE organisation has conducted [participatory research](#) on prevention of drug addiction, in which young people have actively analysed risk factors and proposed solutions within their communities. These examples within civil society demonstrate a shift from hierarchical communication toward peer-based influence. Unlike state-led campaigns, these initiatives create spaces for dialogue, increasing trust and engagement among young people as well as making prevention efforts more effective.

From criminalization of drug use to a public health perspective

A criminalization-based approach to drug use prioritises policing and punishment. While intended to prevent drug use, it often reinforces stigma and discourages individuals from seeking help. In contrast, a public health approach views addiction as a multifaceted issue, shaped by psychological, social, and environmental factors. This shift is significant because it reframes drug use from a legal issue to a social and health concern, which can reduce stigma and improve access to support services. This preferable approach is also reflected in [international youth advocacy](#) for harm reduction. From a broader perspective, this transformation can be understood through a constructivist lens, where changes in discourse shape social reality and eventually influence policy outcomes.

Significantly, [young people in BiH](#) are driving this type of change, for instance by leading community projects, advocating for sustainability, volunteering, and using social media to raise awareness about important social issues.

Youth perception and awareness on drug abuse

Based on youth perception and legal awareness, young people generally recognise that drugs are harmful. However, their knowledge is often superficial, focusing mainly on physical consequences while lacking a deeper understanding of psychological effects and legal regulations. Participants frequently [report](#) that traditional education programs are too general and theoretical. In contrast, interactive workshops and personal testimonies [are perceived](#) as significantly more effective in shaping understanding.

Furthermore, youth can play a crucial role in reshaping peer perception and public dialogue. Through open conversations, social media engagement, and shared personal experiences, addiction can be framed as a gradual process linked to emotional vulnerability, rather than simple deviance or moral failure. This shift allows for a more empathetic understanding of drug use, moving away from stigmatizing narratives that isolate individuals.

Importantly, peer-to-peer communication creates a space in which young people feel safer in discussing sensitive issues, as messages come from individuals with similar experiences rather than authority figures. This increases trust and makes prevention efforts more relatable and impactful. For example, testimonies from former users or peer-led discussions [often resonate](#) more strongly than traditional, fear-based campaigns.

Moreover, youth-driven conversations about drug use can contribute to the normalization of seeking help, which is a critical component of a public health approach. By openly addressing topics such as mental health, stress, and social pressure, young people help redefine addiction as a societal issue rather than an individual failure. This highlights the broader importance of peer-to-peer communication in transforming social narratives. In line with constructivist perspectives, such discursive changes gradually reshape collective attitudes and can influence long-term policy development by altering what society considers acceptable, urgent, and legitimate responses to drug use.

Limited policy influence of youth

Despite the possible influence on peers, youth impact on formal policymaking remains limited. Legal reforms depend on slow-moving political and institutional structures, including national strategies. This gap between discursive influence of youth in BiH and institutional change reflects a broader pattern in policy-making in the country, where societal attitudes tend to evolve faster than formal legislation. While public perceptions can shift relatively quickly through education, media, and everyday interactions, institutional reforms are often constrained by bureaucratic procedures, political interests, and legal complexities. As a result, there is frequently a time lag between what society begins to accept and what is formally codified into law.

In the context of drug policy, this means that even when young people promote more progressive, health-oriented narratives, these ideas may take longer to be reflected in official strategies and legislation. However, this does not diminish the importance of their role. On the contrary, youth-driven discourse change is essential in setting the agenda for future policy debates. By challenging stigma, introducing new perspectives, and normalising alternative approaches such as harm reduction, young people contribute to redefining the boundaries of what is considered politically and socially acceptable.

Over time, these discursive shifts can influence policymakers indirectly by shaping public opinion, increasing pressure for reform, and providing new frameworks through which drug-related issues are understood. In this sense, youth engagement functions as a precursor to institutional change, laying the groundwork for more comprehensive, inclusive, and health-oriented drug policies in the future.

Looking ahead

Young actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina play a significant role in transforming how we talk about drug abuse. Through activism, participatory research, peer education, and digital engagement, [they are driving](#) a shift from a purely criminalization-based framework toward a broader public health perspective. Although their direct influence on legislation remains limited, their impact on social perception and public dialogue is substantial. By reshaping how addiction is understood and discussed, youth serve as long-term catalysts for policy evolution.

Significantly, young actors exert an indirect influence on how we talk about drugs in BiH. While institutional change is gradual, youth-driven discursive transformation represents a crucial first step toward more balanced, humane, and health-oriented drug policies.