

VOICES

How Macedonia's Bureaucracy Is Failing Young People

February 14, 2018 | Katerina Gogova



Two years ago in Skopje, Macedonia, a pregnant 16-year-old girl sought treatment for problematic opioid drug use but kept hitting a brick wall. Every program she contacted for help gave her the same answers: they didn't know how to administer the treatment she needed, they were not competent to treat minors, and so on.

Meanwhile, the girl also couldn't find anyone who could give her the permission legally required for a minor to be hospitalized; her mother had legal custody and could not be found. The girl would go on to have a miscarriage. She is now 18 years old, a problematic user of opioids, and on the streets.

As this young woman's story shows, there are times when, despite people's best efforts, the laws governing social services in Macedonia can make situations which are already complicated even worse. Even clearer is the fact that too many Macedonian institutions are simply not equipped with the medicine, expertise, or guidance they need to help children who are using drugs.

And for reasons both legal and technical, foster homes, schools, and other supervisory entities cannot fill the gap. Civil society has stepped in, often navigating legal barriers and insufficient funding—but as things stand today, it is not enough.

My colleagues and I at Healthy Options Project in Skopje, a civil society organization dedicated to working with marginalized communities, are working to identify and address these shortcomings. Since 1997, we have provided social services and care for people who use drugs (including minors), sex workers, and their respective families.

We mainly work by directly contacting children on the streets—who are disproportionately Roma and sometimes homeless. It is often these children who suffer the most from policies that leave minors who use drugs with little support. We connect children and their parents with social services, and as they find their footing, we provide them with food and other support.

Last year, meanwhile, as part of a regional effort for the EU's At-Risk Youth Social Empowerment Network, we unveiled research showing Macedonia lacked a unified inter-ministerial approach for recognizing children and at-risk youth. We also found that Macedonia does not have a proper data collection system, which greatly hinders the ability of practitioners and lawmakers to design and implement effective policy.

The publication catalyzed the government to launch a national coordinating body for children and youth who use drugs. This was a clear step forward, and it led to concrete recommendations on how important ministries can serve these young people and kids.

Unfortunately, as of this writing, the Ministry of Health—one of the members of the national coordinating body—has only prepared a draft version of a treatment protocol. It has yet to be officially adopted. But while Macedonia waits for its government to act, the number of minors who use drugs will increase and predictable social and public health problems will follow.

We hope that the protocol will be finally adopted and that its recommendations for a multidisciplinary approach will be seriously considered. Only through shared responsibility and collaboration—within governments and between government and civil society—will we find enduring solutions to this crisis.

Healthy Options Project in Skopje is part of the Youth Organizations for Drug Action coalition, a grantee of the Open Society Foundations.

[Read Healthy Options Project in Skopje's recommendations on how to protect the rights of children and youth who use drugs.](#)

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Katerina

submitted on Feb 24, 2018

I totally agree with this article, but please refrain from calling the country "Macedonia". Its name, as recognized by the UN, the EU, NATO, and other international organizations is the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia - FYROM", while "Macedonia" is a geographic and historical region of Greece. Thank you.

reply

Panagiotis Loukas

submitted on Mar 5, 2018

The name of the country is Macedonia. Greece does not have the monopoly of the name. Thank you.

reply

Martin

submitted on Mar 6, 2018

Katerina

My homeland the Republic of Macedonia is recognised as such by 137 countries members of the United Nations, and all the great powers like the USA Russia China Great Britain Brazil Japan India etc.

There is only one country in the world that is using that abrevation FYROM, Its Greece, unfortunately for us is our racist nextdoor who instead of seeing the future its stucked in its racist past.

Why Greece doesnt respect its people the right of selfdetermination.

reply

Theofilos

submitted on Jun 1, 2018

Macedonians is a Greek tribe like Athenians or Spartans according to ancient findings. The newcomer Slavic tribe of the region want, years after their arrival, to self determined themselves as Macedonians probably because they believe that in this region ancient Macedonians

lived and because the strongest civilization always prevails. Greece could accept the unification of the northern part of ancient Macedonia in Greek Republic as a new region and as a solution of Northern Macedonia's Slavic inhabitants request. We welcome Slavs neighbors to the country their land belongs

reply

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Katerina Gogova is a member of the medical staff at Healthy Options Project in Skopje.



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