



Community-led approaches to reducing HIV stigma, criminalization and shrinking civic space in EECA:

Lessons from EECA

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Services usually supporting women in case of violence are not available for women who use drugs, even harm reduction services **often are inaccessible due to lack of gender-sensitiveness.**



WOMEN ACTIVISTS AGAINST GBV

Stigma, victimization of women using drugs



MEDICAL SERVICES

Refusal to provide medical help, discrimination



POLICE

Criminalization of drug use and violence



SOCIAL SERVICES

Deprivation of parental rights, neglect of social services



SHELTER

Don't accept women who use drugs



HARM REDUCTION PROGRAMS

Lack of gender-sensitive services



HELP IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE:

A guide to ensure shelter, psychosocial and legal services for women who use drugs and experience violence



Across EECA countries, the ***PLHIV Stigma Index 2.0*** identifies stigma and discrimination as **major structural barriers** driving HIV inequities, limiting access to prevention, treatment, and care — especially for key populations.

Fear of stigma leads many people **to avoid healthcare**, conceal their HIV status, or delay treatment, while violence and discrimination against people who use drugs, sex workers, LGBTQI+ people, and other key populations remain widespread across the region.

Punitive laws criminalising HIV exposure, sex work, and drug use reinforce stigma, aggressive policing, and exclusion from services, contributing to major prevention and treatment coverage gaps among key populations.

Decriminalization of drug use in the context of HIV, 2026

1 Criminalization Fuels HIV Risk

People who inject drugs face 14× higher HIV risk than the general population. Criminalization drives needle sharing, reduces NSP & OAMT uptake, and increases HIV incidence.

2 Decriminalization Is a Public Health Imperative

Removing criminal penalties for personal drug use reduces stigma, improves access to harm reduction services (needle programs, opioid treatment), and facilitates engagement with HIV care.

3 Strong International Human Rights Backing

UN bodies, WHO, OHCHR and UNAIDS unanimously support decriminalization. The Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026 targets less than 10% of countries criminalizing drug use by 2025.

4 Decrim ≠ Legalization

Decriminalization removes criminal penalties for personal use — not permission to supply drugs. Administrative responses such as fines or treatment referrals may apply but are not mandatory.

5 Core Principles for Effective Models

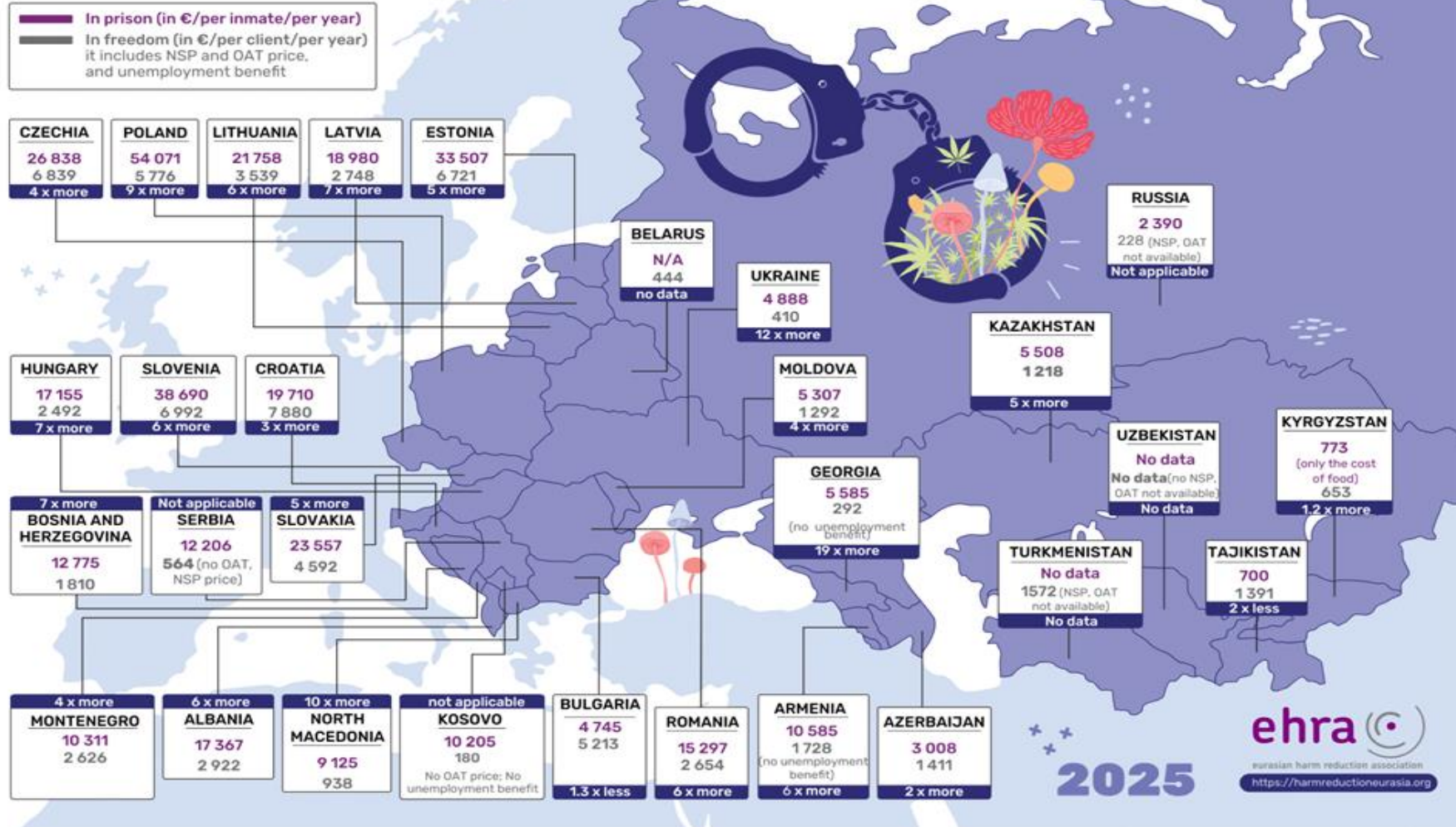
Effective decriminalization must uphold human rights, bodily autonomy, non-discrimination, voluntary consent, and meaningful participation of people who use drugs in policy design.

Decriminalization of drug use in the context of HIV: a guidance note

Creating an enabling legal environment for the HIV response for people who use drugs

In average, incarceration costs are 1.2-**15** times bigger than the money spent for health and social services. The cost of incarceration is calculated by multiplying 365 days (1 year) to the cost of maintenance of one inmate/per day. This sum doesn't include the following expenses: police work, investigation of the case, court proceedings and lost taxes. In almost all of the countries in CEECA region harm reduction and other health services are severely underfunded by the state and depend on international donors.

CRIMINALIZATION COSTS MAP in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA)





Report: Shrinking civic space and marginalised communities in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Report is the outcome of an *extensive regional data collection effort*, conducted in 2025. Drawing on structured inputs from ten countries (*Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan*), the report examines the civic space and legal environment context affecting community-led HIV and TB responses in EECA.





Freedom of association is increasingly restricted across Eastern Europe and Central Asia through foreign agent laws in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, restrictive practices in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Even where such laws don't exist, registration uncertainties, foreign funding constraints, and fear of reprisal limit the independence of organisations working with people living with HIV and marginalised communities.



Although **freedom of peaceful assembly** is formally protected, it is often restricted in practice by violence from private groups and individuals, inconsistent police protection, and weak accountability.

Attacks on activists, particularly LGBTQI+ communities in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine, discourage public participation, while in Central Asia, assemblies on sensitive issues are avoided altogether due to anticipated risks.



Freedom of expression and access to information are constrained through anti-drug propaganda laws, morality-based restrictions on sexual orientation and gender identity, and expanding offline and online control.

It leads to self-censorship among harm reduction, human rights, and gender equality organisations, directly weakening HIV and TB responses.



Criminalisation of key populations and weak protection from reprisal continue to block access to health and safety across the region. Uzbekistan criminalizes same-sex relations between men and prosecutes transgender women.

Punitive drug registries across the region, and ongoing violence against marginalized communities, push people away from health services and deepen distrust in the regions.

Decriminalisation removes punitive laws and fear, helping reduce HIV stigma and improving access to testing, treatment, and support.

Open civic space enables communities affected by HIV to organise, advocate for their rights, challenge discrimination, and hold governments accountable.

Together, **decriminalisation and protected civic space** create safer, more inclusive societies with better health outcomes, stronger human rights protections, and greater social justice.

Rise & Decriminalize Movement



5 Networks Intersecting Communities



Intersectionality a person belongs to several communities and identities

Building on each others' efforts and experience

4 pillars of our free world: **Bodily autonomy**, **Access to justice**, **Freedom from legal restrictions**, **Availability of comprehensive care services**

Fight **criminalization of activists** and advocacy to secure the future

