

Dear Mrs Vice Mayor,

Your Excellency Ambassador,

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for the hospitality of the city of Blagoevgrad shown to me and for inviting me here to speak on the award "in memory of Irish Journalist Veronica Guerin.

My name is Erik Leijonmarck and I am the secretary general of European Cities Action Network for Drug Free Societies (ECAD) which this city, Blagoevgrad, is a member.

ECAD was founded in 1994 by cities that wanted stronger actions on illicit drugs and reject legalization of them. Since then, our cities have worked very hard to address the size of their drug problems through concerted actions on drugs by investing in prevention, treatment and control.

Today that fight is more important than ever. The challenges we are facing are twofold: One challenge comes from the mafias and the traffickers that trade in drugs. The other challenge comes from commercial interests who invest to make drugs legal, accepted and promoted to young people much like alcohol and tobacco is today. Big Tobacco 2.0 is at our doorstep.

Keeping drugs illegal is a good start to minimize their use and negative health consequences. But it is not enough. When US president Robert Kennedy announced in 1961 that before the end of that decade the US would put a man on the moon his priorities were questioned. Why focus on such a far off task when there were more imminent needed to be addressed? His answer was that If a society sincerely commits to an ambitious target it will bring about the best of individuals and force positive change.

The analogy with drugs is that by working to prevent their use, we as a society, are forced to care and step up our game. We could not and should not turn a blind eye to vulnerabilities in people around us, especially the younger ones who are engaging in risky behavior and/or substance use. Risk factors in our societies should be minimized and protective factors strengthened.

Each one of us, as individuals, also need to step up. It is our duty as citizens, parents, friends, coworkers or employees to see and care for the needs of each other. The fight Veronica Guerin fought was an important one. Her bravery and persistence is an admiration to us all to do our part as best as we can.

We must never give up on policing and prosecuting criminals and their organizations but we must also be tough and address the vulnerabilities in our communities that legitimize crime and fuels demand for drugs.

We are very glad to have the city of Blagoevgrad on board for this important work and we are very proud over the work being done by Veronica Guerin and her successors, in Ireland, in Bulgaria and across Europe.

Thank you.

Erik Leijonmarck

Secretary General ECAD