



An open letter to the foreign participants of the 5th Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference

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All other foreign participants of the 5th Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference

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Dear colleagues,

We, activists and representatives of the key populations affected by HIV and non-governmental organizations working in the field of combating the HIV epidemic in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) and other countries, with this open letter would like to express our concern in anticipation of your expected participation in the 5th Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference that will take place in Moscow in March 23-25, 2016.

The region of EECA is the only region in the world where the HIV epidemic continues to spread (most notably in Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan) and where the rate HIV related deaths continues to grow. Just



two countries, Russia and Ukraine, account for more than 85% of the total population living with HIV in the region. The community of people who inject drugs is the one most affected by of HIV. This is why holding a regional conference to address critical issues of prevention, treatment and care associated with HIV extremely important and we fully support holding such a conference.

But not in Russia! We are sure you are well aware that the Russian government openly opposes effective evidence-based approaches to HIV prevention, substituting them with purges and criminalization and instilling intolerance and discrimination towards the groups most affected by HIV as people who use drugs (PUD), sex workers and men who have sex with men.

This conference must not be held in the country where the law contradicts what we know is humane and effective in countering HIV. For 22 years International AIDS Conferences were not held in the USA because of its law limiting travel by people living with HIV which contradicted good practice in human rights and public health. Only once this law was abrogated was the conference held there.

The Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference must not be held in the country that has recently adopted a number of homophobic laws which led to hate mongering, physical violence and psychological abuse of LGBTIQ community members. Within the limits of this legislation, open participation of LGBTIQ community representatives in the conference and discussion of LGBTIQ issues might be considered as propaganda of homosexuality and can lead to prosecution under the law. Work on HIV prevention among the LGBTIQ community became almost impossible in Russia within the bounds of these laws.

The activists from other countries of the region who receive opioid substitution therapy (OST) with methadone and buprenorphine will not be able to take part in the conference because OST is banned in Russia. Let's not forget that, since OST programs were shut down in Crimea by the decision of Russian officials last year, more than 100 former OST clients¹ have died! Others were forced to abandon their homes and either move to other countries to continue the treatment or return to the use of illicit drugs. Instead of discussing this issue with UN and other organizations interested in resolution of this humanitarian crisis, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation issued a note to the Special Envoy of the UN General Secretary for HIV/AIDS in EECA demanding it to stop publishing the data on mortality rates of former OST clients in Crimea.

Less than a month ago, the representatives of the Russian State Duma announced the start of an international campaign against opioid substitution therapy in advance to the Special Session of the General Assembly UNGASS 2016² which was launched by threatening of World Health Organization (WHO) because of its position on the issue. The State Duma threatens to cease funding of WHO if its position on the issue is not changed.

For the recent years the Russian government is carrying out a battle against non-profit organizations, limiting their activity, blocking access to funding and labeling them as “foreign agents”. Immediately after last year's regional conference “EECAC – 2014”, the Russian Ministry of Justice conducted large-scale audits of AIDS organizations throughout the country. The Russian Ministry of Justice refused to register a self-organization of sex workers aiming to advocate rights, health, and access to HIV prevention and treatment for representatives of this group.

¹ The Guardian. Ukrainian drug addicts dying due to treatment ban, says UN.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/20/ukrainian-drug-addicts-dying-due-to-treatment-ban-says-un>

² The Methadone got the geopolitical opponent <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2782912> (in Russian)



Perhaps you console yourselves by arguments that your participation in this conference will contribute to advocacy and education of Russian officials and will help to improve the situation in the country, but that is not the case! They are fully aware of all the arguments for implementing evidence-based approaches to HIV prevention and that the statistics of HIV rates in Russia confirm inefficiency of the approaches they currently use. International organizations have already invested millions of dollars in programs of training for these bureaucrats. The problem of the Russian government is not the lack of knowledge or information, but the existing policy of deliberate zero tolerance towards those social groups most affected by the HIV epidemic in Russia.

We call UNAIDS and WHO to stop humiliating themselves in front of Russian officials and making excuses that it could change the situation! We have witnessed situations where UN officials and international experts at the highest level are subjected to public humiliation and swearing from the «hosts» of the conference as they berate them in plain view of the public for statements in support of effective prevention. We believe that honor and dignity of UN officials as well as that of community representatives are worth more than the money which Russian officials are graciously splurging on this conference.

And, lastly, the ‘regional’ conference which has been exclusively held in Russia for the past five years does not actually reflect positions of the countries in the region but, on the contrary, hampers the other nations' expression on this serious topic. The representatives of the countries and communities of the region are here in a minority, which allows Russia to block discussions about implementing evidence-based harm reduction programs, substitution therapy, necessity of systems strengthening for affected communities and protection of their rights in the framework of government programs. The Russian government uses this conference for validation and promotion of its own murderous policy on HIV in other countries of the region.

Taking all the aforementioned remarks in this letter into consideration **we call you to renounce your participation in EECAC – 2016**. We do not need a conference that is used for achievement of geopolitical goals and satisfaction of political ambitions of Russia; we need access to HIV prevention and treatment; we need evidence-based programs and protection of our rights and respect to our communities!

We also once again call UNAIDS to discontinue its unspoken collaboration and support of discriminatory repressive policy of the Russian government and its participation as a co-organizer in the conference.

Best regards,

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Dr. Rick Lines Executive Director Harm Reduction International	Alvaro Bermejo Executive Director International HIV/AIDS Alliance



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