

IAS urges Russian government to radically reassess counterproductive drug policies

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28 June 2011. Geneva, Switzerland. As Boris Gryzlov, speaker of the Russian state Duma, calls for a "total war on drugs" to tackle Russia's growing drug problem, the International AIDS Society (IAS) urges the Russian government to radically reassess its approach to drug policy, and to accept that the war on drugs has failed dramatically from both a law enforcement and a public health perspective.

Under new laws being drawn up by the Russian parliament, injecting drug users would be forced into treatment or jailed, while drug dealers would be sent to forced labour camps. These new measures contradict the recommendations of the recent report by the Global Commission on Drugs Policy, which clearly states that there must be a shift away from criminalizing drugs and incarcerating those who use them, and which calls on policy makers to "end the criminalization, marginalization and stigmatization of people who use drugs but who do no harm to others."

These new measures also ignore existing solid scientific evidence demonstrating that harm reduction programmes, including Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST), are effective in keeping injecting drug users (IDUs) in treatment programmes, reducing [risky behaviors](#) and mitigating a wide range of health and social consequences of [drug dependence](#).

Outside of [sub-Saharan Africa](#), injecting drug use accounts for approximately one in three new cases of HIV. In some areas of rapid HIV spread, such as in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, injecting drug

use is the primary cause of new HIV infections. Legal barriers to scientifically proven prevention services such as needle and syringe programs and opioid [substitution therapy](#) (OST) mean hundreds of thousands of people become infected with HIV and [Hepatitis C](#) every year. The effectiveness of these programmes is well-documented, though access to such interventions is often limited in those locations where HIV is spreading most rapidly. According to various scientific reviews conducted by the World Health Organization, the Institute of Medicine (U.S.) and others, these programmes reduce HIV rates without increasing drug use.

"With an estimated 6 million heroin addicts, Russia's hard-line "war on drugs" has proved entirely ineffective in terms of curbing the growing numbers of injecting drug users, " said IAS President Elly Katabira. "Injecting drug-use is also fuelling Russia's HIV crisis because, despite the addition of OST medicines to the World Health Organization's essential medicine's list, and despite the growing international acknowledgement of the success of harm reduction programmes – OST is banned in Russia and needle exchange programmes are scarce."

Last year, the International AIDS Society, along with other leading scientific and health policy organizations, launched the Vienna Declaration (www.viennadeclaration.com), a statement seeking to improve community health and safety by calling for the incorporation of scientific evidence into illicit drug policies. The statement calls for a complete reorientation of international drug policy towards evidence-based approaches that respect, protect and fulfill human rights, and which would allow for the redirection of the vast financial resources spent on law-enforcement towards where they are needed most: implementing and evaluating evidence-based prevention, regulatory, treatment and harm reduction interventions. Over 20, 000 scientists, policy makers and political figures, including three former Latin American presidents, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazil), Ernesto

Zedillo (México) and César Gaviria (Colombia), have signed the declaration.

"To deny people evidence-based treatment and then to jail them in overcrowded prisons -- where individuals already vulnerable to HIV infection are placed in an even higher risk setting -- amounts to nothing less than state complicity in human rights abuses," said Bertrand Audoin, IAS Executive Director. "Instead of criminalization, which has resulted in record incarceration rates and a massive burden on the taxpayer, the Russian government needs to turn its back on the harsh rhetoric of the "war on drugs" and instead invest time, effort and money in rehabilitation, substitution treatment, case management for [drug users](#) and protection from [HIV infection](#)."

Provided by International AIDS Society

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