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Positive developments and lessons learnt from national processes in CEECA countries

Eurasian Harm Reduction Association

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Good day, ladies and gentlemen!

I represent the community of people who use drugs and work in Eurasian Harm Reduction Association. Its mission is the creation of favorable environment for sustainable harm reduction programs and decent lives of people who use drugs in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

In our region national drug policies are skewed towards criminalization rather than health-oriented approaches (with an exception of Czech Republic). Methadone is overregulated by law enforcement. This results in massive incarcerations of people who use drugs, HIV/ TB outbreaks, low accessibility and quality of drug treatment. However, recent years were marked by policy dialogues on more effective law enforcement policies, proportionality of punishment, differentiation between drug use and drug dealing, and better cooperation between police and harm reduction programs.

For example, In **Estonia** in June 2018, the pilot program was launched, which would allow individuals who have been detained for use or possession of a small amount of drugs, to get social and medical support instead of fine punishment.

In **Lithuania** in October 2018 the Parliament has legalized cannabis derived medicines and allowed research with all substances from the 1st list.

In **Georgia**, there are 4 drug policy bills in parliamentary pipeline now, one of them abolishes the automatic removal of civilian rights from drug convicts and moves this measure to the discretion of judges. However, these positive moves remain caught in the first iterations with the committees.

Since 2019, in **Kyrgyzstan** the new Code of Misconduct will come into power, according to which people will not carry criminal records for possession of small amount of drugs, if people would be able to pay a fine at each arrest – as is permitted in the international drug control conventions.

As well as good progress though, still much needs to be improved across the region. The strict implementation of drug law enforcement in most countries to wreck people's lives – even for cannabis use.

In **Lithuania**, since 2017 has re-criminalized all drugs. During 2017, 60% out of more than 2,400 criminal records for possession of any amount of any drug, are among people aged 18-29.

In **Kyrgyzstan** the practical implementation of the Code of Misconduct that replaces criminal penalties with fines could increase poverty rates among people who inject drugs and their families, and an inability to pay fines will lead to the growth in prison population at the expense of people who use drugs.

In some countries across the region, opioid substitution therapy remains unavailable or existing programmes are at risk of closure. Our community advocacy efforts are aimed on saving these life-saving programmes, and to promote more inclusive, accessible models such as peer-driven harm reduction and take-home OST pills to support people to live regular lives.

This needs to be done to increase the coverage of OST programs in the region which is below the recommended by WHO level.

Fundamentally, our work is about reminding countries across the region of their unavoidable obligations to protect the rights of citizens to get the highest attainable level of health and well-being. These obligations override anything else.