Combating HIV/AIDS within the European Union and in the neighbouring countries, 2006-2009

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution drafted by Georgs **ANDREJEVS** (ALDE, LV) welcoming the Commission communication on combating HIV/AIDS within the EU and in the neighbouring countries, 2006-2009, and supporting the actions and initiatives suggested in it. It asked the Commission analyse the latest available data on new HIV infections to identify the countries and population groups most affected by this epidemic and communicate its findings to the respective Member States. The Commission must specify, according to national data provided by the Member States, the most vulnerable groups in each society and establish a comprehensive list of such groups.

It pointed out that, according to the UNAIDS Epidemic Update for 2006, more than 39.5 million people worldwide are living with HIV and 4.3 million people were newly infected with HIV in 2006. 95% of the people affected by HIV/AIDS live in developing countries. Reports from EuroHIV and UNAIDS confirm that the number of new HIV infections is still rising at an alarming rate within the EU as well as in the neighbouring countries, and that in some countries the estimated number of people infected with HIV is almost three times higher than the official number. The epidemic among IDUs is one of the reasons for the rapid spread of HIV infection in many Eastern European countries.

Women now represent 50% of people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide, but their special needs with regard to reproductive health in terms of family planning, safe births and breastfeeding of babies are often overlooked. According to UNAIDS, over the past two years, the number of women and girls infected with HIV has increased in every region of the world, with rates rising particularly rapidly in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Parliament urged the Commission to consider appropriate measures to reach migrant and immigrant populations within the EU, especially when they come from countries with high prevalence rates, in order to slow down the alarming trend of new HIV infections among these groups. It also urged the Commission to use all available instruments, such as the Neighbourhood Policy and the Northern Dimension Instruments, to reach the vulnerable population groups in the neighbouring countries, with particular attention to the Kaliningrad area of Russia.

Amongst many recommendations, Parliament asked the Commission (and the Member States when within the purview of the latter) to do the following:

- to develop evidence-based programmes and to promote the implementation of prevention and harm-reduction measures, including the use of condoms, drug substitution treatment, access to voluntary testing, clean needle and syringe exchanges; -to promote communication campaigns which will provide the population with clear information concerning HIV infection, on ways of preventing infection, on unsafe practices and on practices which help to prevent infection with HIV;

- to offer political support and technical assistance to neighbouring countries which wish to take advantage of the flexibilities contained in the TRIPS Agreement when faced with a public-health problem, and to offer support in building up infrastructure for HIV counselling and testing as well as distribution and follow-up of medication;

- to pay particular attention to the promotion of sexual and reproductive health programmes for women, in order to counter the increasing spread of the epidemic among the female population;

- to define clearly the rules for using the Structural Funds and the Social Funds for HIV/AIDS related projects and/or programmes;

- to use all the possibilities available within the Seventh Framework Programme on Research and Development to continue to fund and identify further promising projects concerning HIV/AIDS research and the development of new innovative ARV drugs, vaccines and microbicides;

- to ensure that HIV/AIDS research is gender balanced and includes various physiological and biological aspects as regards the nature of transmitting viruses;

- to explore the possibilities and practical means and to use the results of clinical research to combat HIV /AIDS in the partner countries, the Western Balkans and Central Asia, following the procedures for external aid and respecting the directives for action as agreed in the strategy documents with the relevant countries and the indicative programmes;

Parliament also strongly encouraged the Commission and the Member States to subsidise research and development of microbicides and female condoms which give women the power to protect themselves and a male partner from HIV/AIDS with or without the partner's agreement.

It was concerned about the high costs of new and second-line drugs to treat AIDS, and called for a fundamental debate on patent law. Small adjustments to a product or to an active ingredient should be allowed to result only in a proportional extension to the period of patent protection. It asked Member States to consider giving a mandate, in accordance with Articles 300 and 308 of the EC Treaty, and limited in scope and time, to the Commission on behalf of the EU to negotiate with the pharmaceuticals industry an agreement aiming at lower prices for ARV drugs in the EU.

Lastly, Parliament suggested the establishment of a "clearinghouse" at EU level with the objective of collecting and analysing best practices from all institutions and organisations active in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It felt that such a mechanism would help to identify shortcomings in the existing actions and to formulate new strategies.