HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe

NEWS

Praised Russian Prevention Program Faces Loss of Funds

In 2006, then-President Putin pledged increased support for HIV/AIDS programs, but the government recently declined to fund some key efforts

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Yet in July 2009, a month before the end of the GLOBUS grant, Bobrik received word that the government would not bankroll the consortium after all. Several other NGOs had to lay off employees or close up shop. One is LaSky, a prevention project for men who have sex with men in St. Petersburg. “Our clients have no place to go,” says Ilya Kurmaev, who runs the effort. A recent study by Stelilit—an NGO in the city—found a prevalence in that population approaching 12%.

Evgeniy Petunin, who is based in Moscow and heads the Russian Harm Reduction Network—an NGO that has depended on Global Fund money—says the government has no specialists who work with IDUs. “Harm reduction in Russia is dying,” says Petunin. “The government doesn’t pay attention to the problem.”

Nicolas Cantau, the portfolio manager for the Global Fund in charge of the GLOBUS grant, says a battle between government agencies led to the sudden change of heart about supporting GLOBUS: The health ministry argued that it made more sense to promote “healthy lifestyles” to prevent HIV infection than to back ineffective harm-reduction programs. “There’s been an ideologically based approach as opposed to following scientific evidence,” says Cantau. “GLOBUS is one of the most successful programs worldwide since the beginning of the Global Fund.”

Complaints about the government’s decision to abandon GLOBUS took center stage in October 2009 at the 3rd EECAAC, again held in Moscow. Attendees included Michel Kazatchkine, the head of the Global Fund, but no one came from the Russian health ministry. The next month, the Global Fund’s board, on “an extraordinary basis” that recognized “an emergency situation,” awarded GLOBUS $24 million to keep the consortium alive through 2011. “There’s a lot of concern about the future,” says Cantau. “It’s just for 2 years, and 2 years is going to pass very quickly.”

Bobrik has mixed feelings about the emergency grant; he’s grateful to the Global Fund but says the new money lets the government off the hook for two more years. Maia Rusakova, a sociologist who runs Stelilit, similarly contends that Russia must support these efforts at the local and federal level. “Our politicians know how to look quite nice and they say a lot of things, but they don’t do it,” says Rusakova. “The situation is very, very serious, and I’m concerned that it looks like a ticking bomb.”

—JON COHEN

Climate change. Vladimir Putin’s (above) bold HIV/AIDS stance has weakened, leaving the Global Fund to rescue Alexey Bobrik’s (below) NGO consortium.

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Jon Cohen (July 8, 2010)

Editor's Summary

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