Mini-Conference

Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities to Promote Humane Drug Policy in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Speakers:
- Dr Denis Khrivosheev, Deputy Programme Director, Europe and Central Asia; London, United Kingdom
- Ms Eka Iakobishvili, Human Rights Advisor, Eurasian Harm Reduction Network; Phd Student, Human Rights Centre
- Dr Rick Lines, Executive Director, Harm Reduction International; London, United Kingdom
- Ms Anya Sarang, President and Founder, Andrey Rylkov Foundation, Moscow, Russia
- Mr Mikhail Golichenko, Senior Policy Analyst, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network; Toronto Canada

Chairs:
- Prof Nigel South, Centre for Criminology, Department of Sociology, University of Essex
- Prof Bill Bowring, Birkbeck University School of Law

Date & Time: Wednesday, 17 February 2017, 13:00-16:00
Venue: 1N1.4.1 (Computer Sciences Building)

Conference Overview:
For the past 25 years, countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) located in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region have undergone significant political and socio-economic transition. Political scientists often characterise these countries as "nations in transit", to illustrate the move towards democracy from Soviet rule. Geographically, they are situated between the large economies of the Asian continent and the European West and are thus key transit points where migration and illicit trafficking flows converge. Many of these States have crafted powerful narratives of anxiety and fear in response to the ebb and flow of refugees, migrants, and illicit drugs that cross their borders, and channel these responses towards matters of law and order. Over the last two decades, many of these countries have shifted towards conservative ideologies and are increasingly relapsing to authoritarian rule. Conservative ruling classes and religious institutions have emerged as highly influential political actors, enacting policies and laws that equate to State sponsored stigma towards members of society who are viewed as 'deviant' from orthodox conceptions of 'normalcy'. Combined with Russia's increasing influence in the region, civil society space has dwindled, political opposition has been silenced, human rights protections remain weak, and the rule of law has been undeveloped. As such, some of the most marginalised groups of society have experienced systemic and widespread human rights abuses with devastating consequences for racial and ethnic minorities, sex workers, LGBTI communities, and persons who use drugs.

The FSU countries are currently experiencing the highest rates of HIV and Hepatitis C infections in their history, reaching epidemic levels and rapidly growing each year. The majority of transmission occurs through unsafe injection drug use and unsafe sexual activity. At the same time, the law and policy environment is highly punitive towards illicit drugs, criminalising personal use and possession. Public health responses fail to provide sufficient access to scientifically grounded treatment interventions. As such, the region's drug policy can be broadly characterised to include arbitrary and violent policing from corrupt law enforcement, disproportionate sentencing and review, from an impartial judicial system, and un-scientific and non-evidence based approaches to treatment of drug dependence. This conference seeks to understand the existing socio-political climate within the FSU constellation of countries, with a particular focus on the legislative, legal and policy environment that leads to these epidemic levels of infectious disease and what that means for human rights. The discussion will centre around the current state of human rights in the region, the role of the Russian Federation in shaping the climate, and the challenges of including evidence and human rights in the development of more humane drug policy for the region as a whole. Specifically, we will examine the potential of three cases currently pending at the European Court of Human Rights as a catalyst for strengthening calls for regional reform. The conference presents a multi-disciplinary perspective of the region and the issue, bringing together international human rights law experts, regional experts, grassroots HIV activists, the plaintiff's litigator for the ECtHR cases, and social scientists to understand both challenges and opportunities for advancing more humane drug policy in the region.

Key strategic outcomes for the meeting include:
- Understand the geo-political threats to human rights in the region
- Raise awareness on the ways in which highly punitive drug control models in the region impact the health and human rights of marginalised sectors of society
- Develop ideas on short-term strategic litigation strategy to ensure a higher profile of the three European Court cases
- Begin to develop thinking on long-term regional advocacy plans to ensure sustained, robust local capacity to advance access to evidence-based drug treatment

Drinks & refreshments will be provided - All Welcome