

To: The Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia
The President of the Republic of North Macedonia
The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia

From: Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (SWAN)

Subject: Letter of concern regarding major budget cuts for the national response to HIV in North Macedonia

Date: 01.04.2022, Budapest, Hungary

Respected Mr. President of the Republic of North Macedonia,
Respected Members of the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia,
Respected Members of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia,

The Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) is a sex worker-led regional network in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia that advocates for the human rights of female, male and transgender sex workers. Currently it unites 30 member organizations from 21 countries of CEECA region.

We at SWAN are deeply concerned by the latest news from our members, partners and collaborators that after two decades the HIV prevention programs in North Macedonia are facing possible closure, as a result of 40% reduction of the budget for HIV prevention that is disbursed to civil society organizations for service delivery.

These essential public health programs target key affected populations, including people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men, the people living with HIV, as well as sex workers and they have been the core of North Macedonia's response to the epidemic for almost 20 years.

The model developed in North Macedonia for service delivery among key affected populations, and especially among sex workers was promoted as best practice model, and used as a positive and learning example for many years across our region. It was evident that thanks to the early introduction of harm reduction and sex workers' programming, including outreach HIV testing, North Macedonia has been able to avert the HIV epidemic among key populations, and regularly reports on zero cases of HIV prevalence among sex workers.

The good practices of service delivery were reinforced and widely promoted in the last years when the country was transitioning from the funding of Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which invested 25.7 million USD for HIV alone in the country, toward the governmental funding and attempts to secure national sustainability of the programs.

To see this well-developed system regressing, after 20 years of strengthening and investments is worrying, and information that it has been done in absence of any evidence base or expert consultation makes it disturbing. Meaningful involvement of the affected populations and organizations is the key element of democratic principles, and effective response to any health of other crisis.

Having in mind all above mentioned, we urge you take all necessary actions within your power:

- (1) to reverse the decision of Ministry of Health to cut the 2022 annual budget for HIV prevention services,
- (2) to accelerate the adoption of proposed changes in the Law on health protection which will ensure sustainability and standardization of HIV prevention services, and
- (3) to cover the expenses of the civil organizations for the first three months in 2022, through interventional funding, considering that those expenses were incurred as a result of the committed maintenance of the programs by the organizations, while funding was being delayed by the Ministry of Health.

With this, you as key decision makers will show that North Macedonia is still on the track to achieve the UN global targets towards ending the HIV epidemic.

Your sincerely,



Stasa Plecas
Executive Director
SWAN Foundation