



Gay communities in Europe face up to HIV!

European Gay Health Seminar – Paris – June 28 and 29, 2007.

Preliminary Short Report by Arnaud WASSON-SIMON, AIDES / aws@aides.org

The European Gay Health Seminar organized by AIDS ACTION EUROPE in Paris on June 28 and 29 2007 brought together about fifty delegates from 21 different countries representing 30 organizations*, primarily local NGOs active on HIV prevention and support with men who have sex with men (MSM). Together we shared innovative practices and lessons learned that are likely to improve the quality of the work we do. We also identified some shared recommendations to improve the situation faced by MSM with regards to HIV in our wide European region, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

Thanks to professional simultaneous translation services in between English, French and Russian, we have been able to adequately enable the participation of several NGO leaders who usually cannot participate to international events because they do not (yet) speak English!

HIV among MSM remains a most pressing public health challenge. In Western Europe, MSM still represent a large proportion of the newly diagnosed cases of HIV. HIV prevalence among MSM in gay community settings often exceeds 10%. In Central and Eastern Europe, the prevalence of HIV among MSM is estimated to be much lower but there remain enormous gaps in our knowledge of the epidemic in several countries, partly because many MSM prefer to not reveal their sexual practices: in Poland for instance, the route of transmission for almost half of the positive HIV diagnoses is reported as "unknown" by the health authorities... According to local Polish NGOs, many of these "unknown" diagnoses concern MSM.

In Paris, we shared therefore some of the strategies we have developed to reduce the vulnerability of MSM with regards to HIV/AIDS:

The need to involve - at all levels - MSM living with HIV and MSM most at risk of HIV infection:

Individuals and communities play a central role in improving and preserving health... One of our core added values as local civil society organizations is therefore our capacity to mobilize the people who are most closely affected by the HIV epidemic in a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment in order to make sure that their needs and aspirations are fully taken into account when designing and implementing health promotion programmes. Such community-based work is done successfully for instance by SIEC-PLUS in Poland (with health services specifically for MSM living with HIV) or by the All Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV (that organizes self-help groups across Ukraine).

Reaching MSM on the Internet:

We need to reach MSM wherever they happen to be reachable... and it is now obvious that some websites have now become very popular among MSM (some online forums for gay and bisexual men now have several hundreds of thousands of registered users...). Online interventions such as the "Gay Cruise" by the City of Rotterdam or the peer-support in Slovenian language by the NGO ŠKUC-MAGNUS made it possible to provide quality support and information regarding HIV/AIDS that is tailored to individual needs.

Changing behaviors:

Several organizations in Central and Eastern Europe (notably the local branches of the American organization Population Services International) implement social marketing and behavior change strategies in order to increase consistent condom use and testing for HIV by MSM. One such method is the Popular Opinion Leader model in which trusted, well-liked people are recruited and encouraged to endorse safer-sex practices among their friends. When implementing such ready-made interventions, we clearly need to fully into account the local specificities of the communities we are working with... In Bucharest for instance, it appears that gay bars close down on a regular basis... it not easy in such a context to implement sustained interventions with a specific group of gay men!

Changing Europe!

We are most alarmed by the fact that homophobia and intolerance remains today in the agenda of several high-level politicians both in member-states of the enlarged European and in several neighboring countries. In Bucharest, Krakow, Moscow, Riga and several other cities, organizing a peaceful public demonstration in favor of the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual people is very challenging, due to both violent opposition from local extremist groups and/or outspoken homophobia from public officials. In such oppressive contexts, effectively reaching and mobilizing men who have sex with men to talk about HIV prevention or health becomes extremely difficult... We therefore count on the European Union to be far more assertive in defending and promoting its own founding values: human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. This is a matter of human rights... and of public health!

This seminar was funded by the European Commission, by AIDES private donors, and by Population Services International (*Thanks!*)

* Vibrant delegates from the following organizations and networks participated to the seminar:

Sensoa (Belgium), Hrvoje Fuchek, Iskorak / *Sexual and Gender minorities Centre* (Croatia), Czech AIDS Help Society (Czech Republic), Estonian Network of People Living with HIV (Estonia), AIDES, Act Up-Paris, Warning (France), AIDS-Hilfe North-Rhine Westphalia (Germany), Synthesis (Greece), Gay HIV Strategies (Ireland), AGIHAS (Latvia), Pozityvus Gyvenimas / *Positive Life* (Lithuania), EGAL (Macedonia), the Municipal Public Health Service Rotterdam-Rijnmond, Schorer (Netherlands), Kampania Przeciw Homofobii / *Campaign Against Homophobia*, SIEC PLUS (Poland), Abraço (Portugal), Accept, PSI Romania (Romania), the « Siberian Alternative » Centre, Lasky Project of PSI Russia (Russia), Safe Pulse of Youth (Serbia), ŠKUC-MAGNUS (Slovenia), Grupo de Trabajo Sobre Tratamientos del VIH (Spain), Positiva Gruppen (Sweden), AIDS Foundation East-West, All Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV, Substance Abuse and AIDS Prevention Foundation (Ukraine). **International organizations:** ECUO - Eastern European & Central Asian Union of PLWH organizations, AIDS ACTION EUROPE, ILGA World, EuroHIV

The members of the seminar preparation team includes Vincent COQUELIN, Sandra ESSID, David MONVOISIN, Arnaud W. SIMON, and Richard STRANZ from AIDES (France), Miran SOLINC from SKUC-Magnus (Slovenia), Dmitry FILIPAU and Andrey BELOGLAZOV from PSI / LaSky (Russia) and Michal MINALTO, SIEC PLUS NGO and the Campaign against Homophobia (Poland). We will meet again soon specifically to make sure the outcomes of this seminar are properly shared and disseminated!

For more information, please contact Ms Sandra ESSID at AIDES:

Office phone: +33 1 41 83 46 34

AIDES Switchboard: +33 1 41 83 46 46

Email: sessid@aides.org