

SUMMARY

Overview of the  
situation of HIV  
policies

Within the HIV context, the following two main achievements marked the year 2018: On one hand, important strategic information were produced, giving a clearer and more complete view of the HIV epidemics in the Republic of Macedonia, and on the other hand, we saw the full establishment of funding practices for prevention and support activities directed toward key populations affected by HIV, and implemented by civil organizations within the National HIV programme<sup>1</sup>. Apart from this, the National HIV Commission in the Ministry of Health was reestablished, where, apart from representatives of relevant institutions, there are also representatives of the civil sector and some of the affected populations. We can say that with these key pillars set, 2018 was a year of affirming national ownership of the HIV epidemics response, i.e. of HIV as a social problem.

In the field of research and analyses, **integrated biobehavioral research was conducted among the three key affected populations** - men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers (SWs) and people who inject drugs (PID) - as well as new assessments of the numbers within each of the three groups. This research shows the behavioral trends from the aspect of the risk of transmitting the HIV infection and the trends within the epidemic. In regard to biological data, all research showed that the HIV epidemics is under control in the PID and SW groups, but is worryingly growing in the group of men who have sex with men, where the prevalence is 5,4%, as opposed to 2014 when it was 1,9%. This number shows for the first time that Macedonia has an epidemics concentrated within one of the key populations.

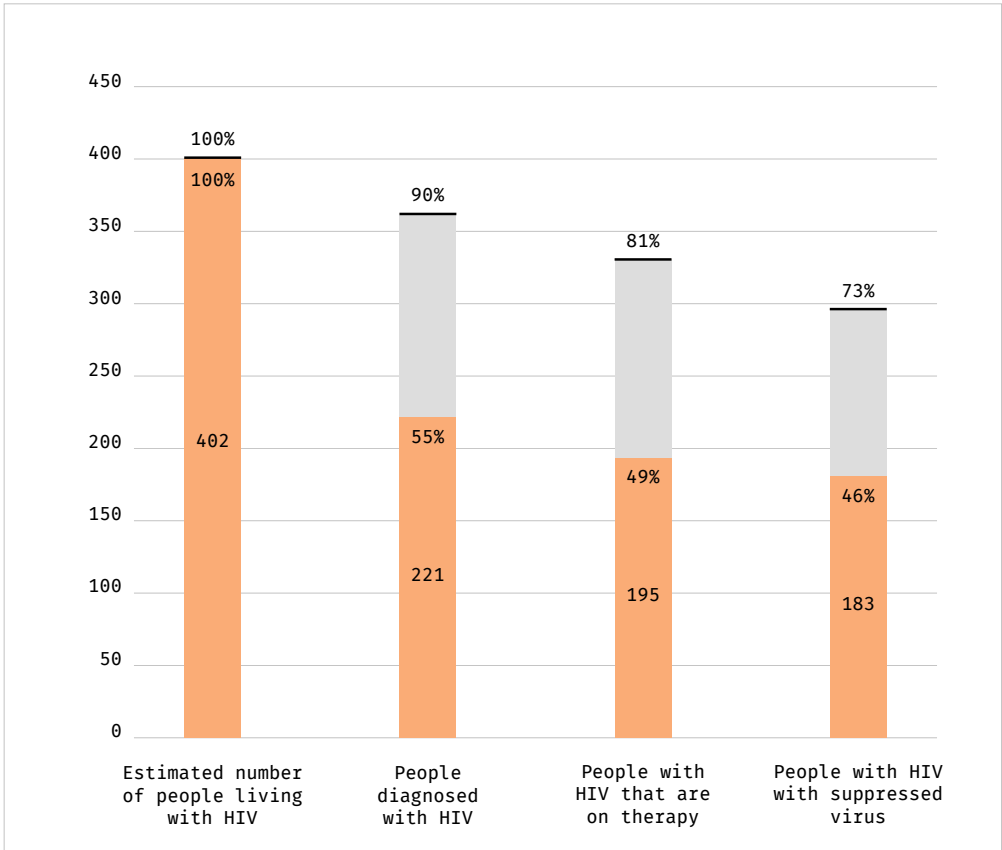
In 2018 for the first time in the Republic of Macedonia a **methodological analysis of the continuum of HIV-related care** was conducted, assessing the success rate of the national HIV response in regard to achieving the global 90-90-90 goals<sup>2</sup> by 2020. According to the analysis findings, the total estimated number of people living with HIV at the end of 2017 was 402, but only 55% of them were aware of their status. On the other hand, the analysis showed that once diagnosed, the people with HIV have access to therapy and support: 88% of diagnosed people received ART, while 94% of those receiving ART had the virus in their blood suppressed. Therefore, the main emphasis in national HIV-related interventions should be placed on raising awareness on HIV testing, in particular in gay and bisexual men and other men having sex with men.

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1 Officially: Programme for protection of the population against HIV infection in the Republic of Macedonia.

2 The global goal known as 90-90-90- was promoted for the first time via UNAIDS, and then officially accepted by all countries within the Political declaration of HIV and AIDS on a special General Assembly session of the UN in 2016. This goal means that by 2020, 90% of the total estimated number of people living with HIV should know their HIV status (they should have had an HIV test, i.e. be diagnosed); from those who know their HIV status, 90% should be on antiretroviral therapy (ART), while 90% of those who are on ART should have the virus suppressed in their blood (i.e. the therapy should be successful)). UNAIDS' estimates show that this is how we can end the HIV epidemics by 2030.

There is a certain contradiction of data on the total number of people living with HIV according to the Methodological analysis of the continuum of HIV-related care, and data received from the estimation of the prevalence and the estimation of the numbers of this population. This shows that it is necessary to repeat the research and analyses in the near future in order to receive a more reliable image of the trends related to the epidemics.



**Graph: Continuum of HIV-related care in the Republic of Macedonia at the end of 2017.**

In 2018 the **Ministry of Health started fully implementing its HIV prevention and support measures directed at key populations**, which are implemented by civil organizations. It may be concluded that the practice of signing contracts and funding was characterized by swift implementation of administrative procedures and flexibility in overcoming technical issues, even despite the lack of previous experience within the Ministry. However, to keep this mechanism going in the long run, it is necessary to enact adequate regulation. For this purpose, the Minister appointed a working group for preparation of proposed solutions for establishing a functional long-term mechanism for funding HIV-related activities intended for key populations implemented by

civil organizations. The process of transition of the national HIV response funding from international to domestic, an effort of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, was greeted on multiple occasions by several global stakeholders in this field.

Through a joint initiative of several parties, the National Commission requested a technical support mission by the World Health Organization in regard to the HIV problem in the population of men having sex with men. This mission was performed in December and it yielded a **Roadmap to strengthened HIV-related prevention and care in gay and bisexual men, other men who have sex with men and trans people in Macedonia**. The measures of this Roadmap include the removal of obstacles in the access to HIV testing, introducing a possibility for self-testing, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), particularly for members of the MSM and trans populations, as well as increased use of new communication tools. As directed by the Minister of Health, the proposed measures are to be inserted in the draft text of the National HIV strategy, which should finally be adopted in the beginning of 2019.

During 2018, civil organizations **registered three cases of human rights violations of people living with HIV**, direct discrimination and harassment on the grounds of HIV status in the health care system, where the health rights and patients' rights were violated as a result. Unfortunately, the victims did not want to take action to protect their rights in any of the cases. The cases witness the high level of stigma and prejudice of medical professionals in regard to the HIV infection, as well as for their lack of basic knowledge on the ways of transmission. Instead of acting based on accurate information and evidence-based medicine, the doctors acted based on their personal beliefs, fallacies and stigma related to HIV. Additionally, after procedures initiated due to cases of discrimination and harassment on the grounds of HIV status and sexual orientation in 2017, the relevant institutions did not find violations of the rights, nor discrimination. **This confirms the findings that LGBTI people and people living with HIV do not have efficient mechanisms for protection against discrimination and rights violations by health care institutions**. In most institutions there is an obvious inertness and lack of interest to protect the victim, as well as acting unprofessionally, contrary to stipulated competencies and the legal framework.

In 2018 there were at least **two more serious cases of common scandalization of the HIV and AIDS topic in the media**. In one of these cases, several media published speculations from the neighboring country of Serbia<sup>3</sup>, and therefore contributed to the misinformation of the public in regard to HIV, indirect

3 PANIC IN SERBIA: FEMALE MIGRANT SPREADS AIDS AMONG OUR NEIGHBORS - THE POLICE IS LOOKING FOR A WOMAN WHO HAS SLEPT WITH MORE THAN 100 MEN, Kurir, Balkan, 26.6.2018; Mk News, 27.6.2018

stigmatization of people living with HIV, as well as direct stigmatization of migrants and sex workers. In the last trimester there was a case of tendentious reporting related to the activities of the National HIV programme, which is used to attack the government by another political party. The text published on the portal Lider<sup>4</sup> uses stigmatizing language toward the LGBTI population, but is also spinning facts and stating direct untruths. The announcements of the political party VMRO-DPMNE<sup>5</sup> supplemented these news, stating even greater untruths. The Coalition strongly condemns hate speech toward LGBTI people, stating untruths and spinning facts by the media and political parties, and points to the damage which can be caused by wrongful information of the public on public health matters.

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4 "Bizarre: The Government is funding the procurement of lubricants - tender issued!" Lider, 9.10.2018.

5 "The Government's explanation that the lubricants were purchased to be distributed together with condoms is bizarre", announcement of VMRO DPMNE, 10.10.2018.

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## Recommendations

The Coalition Margins emphasizes the following priority recommendations for promoting the rights of people living with HIV and improving the HIV-related policies:

- The Ministry of Health should prepare final solution proposals for amendments and supplementations of relevant laws and bylaws in order to establish a functional long-term mechanism for funding activities implemented by civil organizations.
- The Ministry of Health should formalize the good practice of participation of civil organizations and affected communities in making HIV-related decisions within legal acts and procedures which shall guarantee the continued participation of the civil sector.
- The Ministry of Health should take measures for an adequate response to the HIV infection in accordance with the results from the latest epidemiological research.
- The Ministry of Health should start fully implement the Law on protection of patients' rights and strengthen the capacities of the health inspectorate as the relevant organ for monitoring the implementation of this Law.
- The capacities of the Ombudsman should be strengthened, as an institution relevant for protecting the health rights of people living with HIV.
- The media should stop abusing the HIV programme and affected communities, because this means misinformation of the public and causes damage which later may cause a growth in the HIV epidemics in the Republic of Macedonia.