

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends.

I would like to start by extending my special thanks for the organizers of this symposium to include the topic on the agenda, which I am going to address. It is a rare opportunity to talk about the situation of and epidemics among gay men and other men who have sex with men in the Central European and Southeast European countries.

I have been working on the issue of HIV in the NGO sector for over 10 years now. The very first international meeting I attended was in May 2008 in a picturesque small town of Slovenia. The meeting was on HIV/AIDS in Europe, organized under the Slovenian EU presidency. After the meeting, representatives of civil society organizations and networks came together and created the Ljubljana Declaration. The Declaration was to a) warn all stakeholders that HIV remains a most alarming health threat among gay men and other men who have sex with men across the European continent and b) to make a series of suggestions for actions to improve gay sexual health and well being.

We are in 2018, 10 years after the Declaration. Since then, we have learnt so much. We know that treatment also works as prevention, we know that PrEP is effectively preventing the sexual transmission of HIV, we know from experience that community based rapid testing and self-testing kits are playing a crucial role in reaching those that are not reached by public health services.

And we see the results of these inventions and interventions. We see incidence dropping in cities such as London, New York or San Francisco. Elsewhere we are not benefiting from these innovative approaches, our right to health and prevention is being ignored or abuse. We are being left behind...

The elsewhere today I'm talking about are 19 countries of Central and Southeast Europe, allow me to name them, as there is a high chance that you will hear some of these countries mentioned only here: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – all EU member states and six EU enlargement countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey.

These countries are usually referred to as the low-prevalence region. And we communities from the region know from experience that low prevalence equals low or little attention, both at the national but also at the international level.

Although the region is diverse – we are talking about 19 different countries – there are some common features that indicate that this region is clearly left behind in the global response.

The notion of low-prevalence is used by local and national governments to delay or block the introduction of new prevention methods and interventions, it is used to provide little or any funding for NGOs working with key populations and ignore the needs of communities mostly affected by HIV.

There is also a phenomenon of conservatisms and a trend of scapegoating certain populations as part of populism that is fuelling stigma, discrimination against key populations such as sex workers, migrants or gay men and other MSM.

International funding mechanism have either never been present or have already left or are currently leaving the countries of the region, leaving a void in funding for communities and civil society organizations that are not filled in by domestic funding. And those few international donors that are still trying to support civil society in the region are being demonized as foreign influence and used in national election campaigns, as it was the case this spring in my home country, Hungary. NGOs are facing and suffering hostile social and legal environments, being labelled agents of foreign interests.

The UN Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS is not present and funding from the health programme of the European Union is difficult to access for civil society and community based organizations due to lack of capacities or simply as a pre-condition of participation in projects and programmes is the expressed interest of the national governments of their respective countries.

This neglect have resulted in a 300% increase in new HIV-cases among gay men and other MSM in the past 10 years. We still might be talking about relatively small numbers that disappear among the millions that are reported globally but looking at the trend – a 300% increase in 10 years – is a clear sign of neglect.

As the world is on the fast track on reaching the 90-90-90 targets and ending AIDS by 2030, we are seeing communities and regions all over the world being left behind.

When looking at global figures and reports on progress, these regions, these communities disappear. You need to look for them, and if you look, you'll find us: we are the 10-10-10.

10 years after the Ljubljana Declaration, representatives of national and regional HIV and LGBTI organizations and networks came together and published our "Urgent call for action" – Ljubljana 2.0 declaration.

We call on our governments to honor their international commitments and upon EU member states to meet their obligations to respect the fundamental values of the EU.

We call upon the European Union and its institutions to recognize and address the situation of expanding HIV epidemics among gay men and other men who have sex with men in nineteen newer EU member states and candidate countries as an urgent priority.

And finally, we are calling upon international organizations to reinforce advocacy and efforts to build political commitment for scaling up responses to the rapidly expanding epidemics, and to intensify efforts towards ensuring the enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of health for LGBTI people everywhere

And as I am reaching the end of my speech, I must share with you that speaking in public is way outside my comfort zone. For me speaking in public equals anxiety. But as we know from the HIV movement: silence equals death. We cannot stay silent, we all must step out of our comfort zone, we must draw the attention to the fact that currently communities and regions such as gay men and other MSM in Central- and Southeast European countries are being left behind in the HIV response all over the world, and this needs urgent attention, funding and interventions if we are to take our commitments, targets and the goal to ending AIDS by 2030 seriously.

Thank you for the attention.