

Madame High Commissioner!

My name is Irina Teplinskaya, and I am the coordinator for the Andrei Rylkov Health and Social Justice Foundation and also a member of the Steering Committee of the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network.

But my life also has another side to it, about which it is difficult to speak in my country if you don't want to immediately be labelled a pariah. I am 44 years old, and for 30 of those years I have suffered from chronic opiate drug dependency. I have had several unsuccessful attempts at treatment in different clinics, but continue to return to drugs. According to the WHO, drug dependency is a chronic illness – I have spent a total of 16 years in prison for acquiring and possessing drugs for personal use – in other words, for showing the symptoms of my illness! I have acquired Hepatitis C and HIV through unsterilized needles. During my last prison stay in 2007, my HIV transitioned into AIDS, and I caught Tuberculosis. In order for me to receive the life-saving treatment for HIV that should be guaranteed to me by the state, I was forced to go on hunger strike and cut open my veins. My fate is a reflection of the fate of 3 million people. Tens of thousands of young Russians die every year because the law in this country forbids the use of substitution therapy with methadone or buprenorphine, as recommended by the UN and successfully used in all the world's developed countries. These programmes help to stabilise the lives of drug-dependent people, improve their health condition, and help prevent HIV infection and lower crime rates.

Recently in Russia, implementing needle and syringe exchange programmes has become impossible – a key component of effective HIV protection programmes among drug dependent people, as recognised by the UN General Assembly. Even speaking here, I am putting myself in danger, as even scientific debates about methadone, a substance that the WHO calls life-saving, is a breach of Russia law and seen as “drugs propaganda”.

Because there is no opioid substitution therapy in Russia, drug dependent people are not able to receive treatment for HIV and TB, as they are forced to spend whole days acquiring money in a criminal way so they can buy drugs. As a result, they begin treatment too late, when it's already impossible to help them.

Russian drug treatment standards do not provide for any treatment during pregnancy. Drug dependent women are forced either to have an abortion, or to continue taking street drugs right up until the birth. In countries where substitution therapy is available, drug dependent women can give birth, feed and raise their children just like everyone else.

In October 2010, I filed a complaint with the UN's Special Rapporteur on Health Rights, with a request to call on Russia to offer substitution therapy as a treatment for drug dependency. I am preparing complaints to the Russian Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights. The International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is also looking into the issues of the right to healthcare for drug dependent citizens of Russia.

The approach to drug treatment in Russia is based on force, degradation and aggression. Not long ago the country was shocked by the City Without Drugs Foundation, whose employees forcibly detained and locked up drug-dependent people, fixed them with handcuffs, starved, beat and

tortured them. The majority of people support this kind of method of fighting drug addiction, and there was not a single critical statement from Russian human rights workers, in fact some of them even supported them. The stigma associated with drug use in our country is so great that even human rights workers often don't take us for human beings who have rights along with the rest of society.

Russia has a huge influence in the whole post-Soviet region. Even today, Russia's influence has a tragic effect on the health of drug dependent people in Ukraine. The Interior Ministry, supported by the Russian Drugs Control Agency, started a campaign in January 2011 whereby over 6000 patients of substitution therapy programmes live in daily fear that the state at any minute could pull them out of normal life and send them in search of street drugs, thus criminalising them.

Madame High Commissioner! In October 2010, the General Secretary of the UN, Ban Ki Moon, during his trip to Cambodia, demonstrated to the whole world that opioid substitution therapy should be available to drug dependent people. Drug dependent people received methadone from his hands. We are also people and we have the right to live. I am appealing to you to bring two key recommendations to the leadership of Russia:

End the legal restrictions on substitution therapy and start pilot programmes in Russia, and offer financial and political support to needle and syringe exchange programmes, as an integral part of HIV prevention and of bringing medical help to drug users.

Everyone has the right to healthcare without discrimination!