



**HARM REDUCTION**  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2013  
JUNE 9 - 12 | VILNIUS, LITHUANIA

**Media Release**

For Immediate Release

**All eyes on Eurasian HIV/AIDS epidemic as up to 800 politicians, doctors, scientists, and drug user activists arrive in Vilnius for the 23rd International Harm Reduction Conference beginning Sunday June 9**

**Issue of drug use needs to be spoken about more openly in Lithuania - Jurgis Didziulis, The Ball and Chain (conference patrons)**

**Lithuanian Minister of Health Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, former President of Poland, President Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland, and Mark Dybul, Executive Director of the Global Fund To Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, to address the opening ceremony**

**Thursday, 6 June 2013 (Vilnius, Lithuania)--** The Lithuanian Minister of Health Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, former President of Poland, President Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland and Mark Dybul, the Executive Director of the Global Fund To Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria will address the opening ceremony of the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Harm Reduction Conference (IHRC 2013) beginning this coming Sunday June 9.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> International Harm Reduction Conference is expected to attract up to 800 scientists, politicians, researchers, health workers, doctors and drug user activists, from around 60 countries. The three previous conferences took place in Beirut, Lebanon (2011) Liverpool, UK (2010) and Bangkok, Thailand (2009).

“It is timely that the International Harm Reduction Conference is coming to Lithuania this year, especially given the critical nature of the HIV epidemic amongst people who inject drugs in the Eurasian region,” said Rick Lines, Executive Director of Harm Reduction International (HRI), convenors of the conference, at the official launch press conference held in Vilnius today.

The Eurasian region, comprising of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Central Asia, is home to over 3.7 million people who inject drugs, representing almost one-quarter of people who inject worldwide. Injecting drug use is driving HIV epidemics in most countries in Eurasia, where an estimated one million people who inject are living with HIV. In addition to HIV, people who inject drugs in the region experience an extremely high prevalence of hepatitis C, as well as high risk of overdose, which is the leading cause of death among opiate users in many countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

“We are proud that such an important discussion on the issues of HIV/AIDS and drug use in Eurasia is taking place here in Lithuania.” said Lithuanian Minister of Health Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis. “This is a public health issue that requires solutions based on sound research and good practice.”

The conference will focus on key issues affecting the international harm reduction response including the retreat of donors from funding HIV prevention and treatment, the lack of national government funding for harm reduction, as well as the influence of repressive law enforcement and human rights abuses that currently take place in the countries of Eurasia and elsewhere.

In 2010, the world’s governments pledged that by 2015 they would reach the UN Millennium Development Goal of halting and reversing the spread of HIV. In 2010 they pledged to halve new HIV infections among injecting drug users by the same 2015 deadline.

“Injecting drug users have become the forgotten faces of the HIV/AIDS epidemic” said Dasha Ocheret, Deputy Director for Policy and Advocacy of the Eurasian Harm Reduction (EHRN), the local partners of IHRC 2013. “Reducing new HIV infections amongst injecting drug users in general is only going to be possible if the substantial funding gap is addressed and backed up by meaningful political commitment.”

The theme of the Conference 2013 is 'The Value/s of Harm Reduction'. The theme calls on the urgent need to provide sufficient political and financial support to address the HIV epidemic driven by injecting drug use in many parts of the world, as well as emphasising the ethical basis of the harm reduction philosophy.

Kestutis Butkus, an injecting drug user from Lithuania, said he looked forward to the time when all drug users were treated humanely and afforded the same human rights as everyone else.

“We need treatment, not incarceration,” said Butkus. In 2012 Kestutis filed a lawsuit against the Lithuanian prison system, making him the first person in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to sue the government over lack of access to methadone in prisons.

Popular Lithuanian pop group, The Ball and Chain, have also agreed to become patrons of the conference, confirming their long term commitment to HIV/AIDS issues over the years.

“The issue of drug use is something we need to speak about more openly in Lithuania,” said Jurgis Didziulis, The Ball and Chain’s co-founder. “People who use drugs are often treated as second rate citizens and ignored. There is a need to engage with them and see the issues confronting them as a public health concern rather than taking a criminalising approach.”

#### **High level key speaker confirmations at IHRC 2013 include:**

- President Ruth Dreifuss - former president of Switzerland, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy
- President Aleksander Kwaśniewski - former president of Poland, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy
- Michel Kazatchkine, UN Secretary General ‘s Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

- Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director (video message)
- Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis, Lithuanian Minister of Health
- Lord Norman Fowler - Member, British House of Lords; former UK Health Minister
- Mark Dybul, the Executive Director of the Global Fund To Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Craig McClure – Head of HIV/AIDS, UNICEF
- Sir Richard Branson (video message)

END

To join the conversation, please visit our [Facebook page](#) Updates on the campaign are publicly available on our [Twitter Feed](#) or via the hashtag #IHRC2013.

### **Further information:**

Conference program updates can be downloaded at [www.ihra.net/conference](http://www.ihra.net/conference)

### **Media registration**

Registration is free to all accredited media. To register please email [media@ihra.net](mailto:media@ihra.net)

### **Media Enquiries:**

Michael Kessler, In Toon Media  
 Media Manager IHRC 2013  
 Email: [michael.kessler@inton-media.com](mailto:michael.kessler@inton-media.com)  
 Lithuania mobile +370 690 41026 (June 4- 13)  
 Spain Mobile: +34 655 792 699  
 Skype: mickgpi  
 Twitter: [twitter.com/mickessler](https://twitter.com/mickessler)

Justas Nugaras  
 Local Media Coordinator  
 Mobile : +370 6060 5957  
 E-mail: [justas@harm-reduction.org](mailto:justas@harm-reduction.org)  
 Skype: justasn

### **About the IHRC 2013 Organisers:**

#### **Harm Reduction International (HRI)**



Harm Reduction International is a leading non-governmental organisation working to promote and expand support for [harm reduction](#). With over 8,000 members worldwide, Harm Reduction International is the largest membership-based global harm reduction association.

HRI works to reduce the negative health, social and human rights impacts of drug use and drug policy – such as the increased vulnerability to HIV and hepatitis infection among people who inject drugs – by promoting evidence-based public health policies and practices, and human rights based approaches to drug policy.

[www.ihra.net](http://www.ihra.net)

### **Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN)**



The Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN) is a regional network with a **mission** to promote humane, evidence-based harm reduction approaches to drug use, with the aim of improving health and protecting human rights at the individual, community, and societal level.

[www.harm-reduction.org](http://www.harm-reduction.org)