



Brief on HIV Epidemic Situation among MSM and Trans people in North Macedonia

2018



*Eurasian Coalition
on Male Health*

In the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), the HIV epidemic continues to grow. Since 2010, the number of new HIV cases in the region has increased by 30%. There were 130,000 new HIV diagnoses in the region in 2017, 21% of which were among men who have sex with men (MSM)¹.

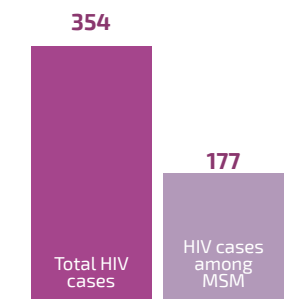
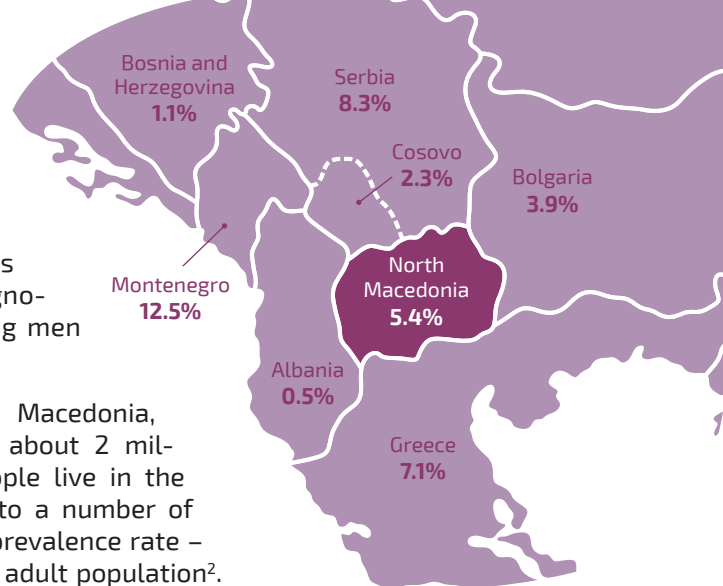


Fig. 1 Cumulative number of registered HIV cases in North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia, where the population is about 2 million people (506,000 people live in the capital, Skopje), belongs to a number of countries with a low HIV prevalence rate – less than 0.1% among the adult population². In 2017, the incidence of HIV per 100,000 people was 0.04%³.

In total, 354 HIV cases have been registered in the country since the beginning of the epidemic until December 2017⁵. The majority of HIV cases occurred among men aged 20–39. The most frequent route of HIV transmission is sexual (homosexual and heterosexual)⁴.



The prevalence of HIV infection among MSM in neighboring countries

The HIV epidemic is mainly concentrated among MSM and commercial sex workers (CSWs). Injection drug users (IDUs) and prisoners are also considered to be vulnerable groups.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, half of all recorded HIV cases were diagnosed among MSM – 177 cases by the end of 2017⁵ (Fig. 1).

The prevalence of HIV among MSM in North Macedonia increased from 0.2% in 2010⁶ to 5.4% in 2017⁷.

The prevalence of HIV among MSM in neighboring countries is: 0.5% in Albania, 1.1% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2.3% in Kosovo⁸, 3.9% in Bulgaria, 7.1% in Greece, 8.3% in Serbia, and 12.5% in Montenegro².

The HIV epidemic can be influenced by migration. Over the last few years, there has been a migration crisis in Europe, primarily due to a large number of migrants from Africa and the Middle East. North Macedonia is a transit country, through which one of the main migration routes to the European Union passes. It is estimated that around 1 million people crossed the borders of North Macedonia in 2015. In 2016, North Macedonia closed the Balkan route to refugees passing through the country.

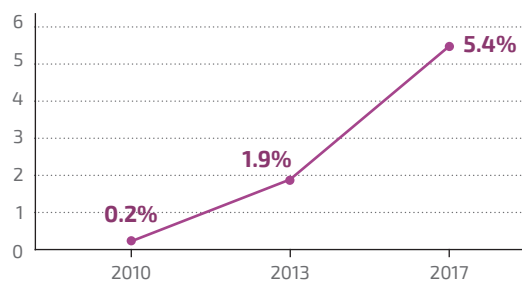


Fig. 2 HIV prevalence among MSM in North Macedonia

Official statistics on migration indicate moderate migration movements. For example, in 2016, 2,481 people entered the country for an extended period, most of them from Turkey. A significant proportion of these people were also from Kosovo, Albania and Serbia. 440 North Macedonian citizens left the country, the majority migrating to Germany and the United States⁹.

¹ UNAIDS Data 2018. – Mode of access to the resource: http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/unaids-data-2018_en.pdf

² UNAIDS Countries data. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/>

³ Билтен за движењето на акутните заразни заболувања во Р. Македонија во месец март, 2018. – Mode of access to the resource: http://iph.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Bilten-03_2018.pdf

⁴ Загрижувачки податоци: Минатиот месец пријавени се 8 нови случаи на ХИВ во Македонија. – Mode of access to the resource: <https://skopjeinfo.mk/zagrizhuvachki-podatoci-minatiot-mesec-prijaveni-se-8-novi-sluchai-na-hiv-vo-makedonija>

⁵ ХИВ/СИДА во светски рамки и во Република Македонија во 2017 г. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.iph.mk/1-dekemvri-2017-svetски-den-za-borba-protiv-hiv-sida/>

⁶ Mikik, Vladimir & Kuzmanovska, Gordana & Memeti, Shaban. (2010). Bio Beahvioural Survey Among MSM in Macedonia, 2010. 10.13140/RG.2.1.4662.8001. – Mode of access to the resource: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278688719_Bio-Beahvioural_Survey_Among_MSM_in_Macedonia_2010?ev=publicSearchHeader&_sg=msj5iJ-T2Y7ZZM0jvRZDW8ZmUWp-brOLM81L36XEfMRmbz3Plrqe5zpWTt1Z3PR5sXZqYs3WWnOCqHU

⁷ UNAIDS nia Country Data. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.unaids.org/ru/regionscountries/countries/the-formeryugoslavrepublicofmacedonia>

⁸ HIV among MSM in EECA. – ECOM. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://ecom.ngo/hiv-msm-eeca/>

⁹ Статистички годишник, 2017. – Република Македонија Државен завод за статистика. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziPoslednaPublikacija.aspx?id=34>



HIV Prevention among MSM in North Macedonia

At the end of 2017, after 15 years of providing financial support to combat HIV infection, and to fund prevention programs for MSM, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GF) completed the implementation of its grant in North Macedonia¹⁰. In 2017, the GF provided 50% of all funding for HIV/AIDS activities in the country¹⁴.

Since 2018, the Ministry of Health of North Macedonia has been responsible for funding all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in HIV prevention among vulnerable groups (through the procurement of social services).

Currently, the Program for Protecting the Population from HIV/AIDS in 2018¹¹ is in progress, within which MSM are recognized as one of the priority groups. Unlike the same Program for 2017¹², which had a common budget for implementing HIV prevention activities among vulnerable populations (MSM, CSWs and IDUs), the Program for 2018 provides targeted funding for HIV prevention activities among MSM¹¹.

It should be noted that the amount of funding for HIV prevention among MSM is equal to the amount previously allocated for all three vulnerable groups. In total, the budget of the 2018 Program exceeds the budget of the previous program by 3.5 times¹³. 48% of the planned funding is allocated to NGOs carrying out HIV prevention among vulnerable groups¹⁴.

The 2018 Program provides free HIV testing and counseling (which is free for everyone, not just for representatives of key populations), distribution of condoms and lubricants to vulnerable groups, including MSM, as well as STI diagnostics and treatment, and psychosocial support¹¹.

Based on the implementation results of the Program for Protecting the Population from HIV/AIDS in 2017, 3,597 MSM were covered with a basic package of HIV prevention services. 22,893 condoms and 18,522 lubricants were distributed¹⁵.

Within the program, training activities were also conducted for health workers in order to raise their awareness about working with MSM and people living with HIV (PLH).

MSM Behavior in the context to HIV

A recent bio-behavioral study among MSM (IBBS) was conducted in 2017, and the results are currently being finalized. However, some indicators are already available for analysis. The last published IBBS was carried out in 2014¹⁶.

The estimated MSM population size in the country is 24,342 people⁷.

The coverage of MSM with HIV testing services has increased two times since 2010: 15.3% of MSM had been tested for HIV in the previous 12 months and knew their results in 2010⁶, while this figure was 31.3% of MSM in 2017⁷ (Fig. 3).

The proportion of MSM who used a condom during their last anal sexual intercourse with a man has increased since 2010 (41% in 2010⁶ and 51.3% in 2017)⁷. This indicator remained constant according to IBBS data from 2014 and 2017 (Fig. 4)

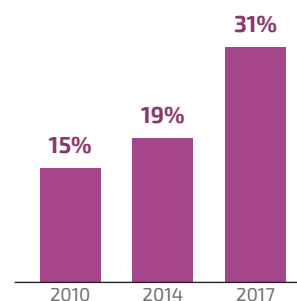


Fig. 3 MSM who have been tested for HIV in the previous 12 months and know their results, IBBS data

¹⁰ Consultation report Access to and availability of SRH and HIV services for Young Key Populations, Focus group discussions among young key populations, Macedonia. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://hera.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CONSULTATION-REPORT-Access-to-and-availability-of-SRH-and-HIV-services-for-Young-Key-Populations.pdf>

¹¹ Програма за заштита на населението од ХИВ ИНФЕКЦИЈА во Република Македонија за 2018 година. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.fzo.org.mk/WBStorage/Files/7.pdf>

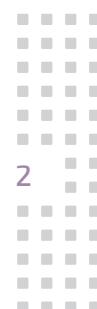
¹² Програма за заштита на населението од ХИВ ИНФЕКЦИЈА во Република Македонија за 2017 година

¹³ Дрндаревска Д. Сексуални и здравствени права на маргинализираните заедници. – Коалиција МАРГИНИ, Годишени звестај 2017. – Скопје, 2018. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://coalition.org.mk/publikacii/godishen-izvestaj-2017/>

¹⁴ Global AIDS Monitoring 2018 Country progress report – The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. – Mode of access to the resource: http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/country/documents/MKD_2018_countryreport.pdf

¹⁵ Годишен извештај за програмска и буџетска реализација на Програмата за заштита на населението од ХИВ/СИДА во Р. Македонија за 2017 година. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://zdravstvo.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/57-Godishen-izvestaj-za-realizatsija-na-Programa-za-zashtita-na-naselenieto-od-HIV-SIDA-za-2017-.pdf>

¹⁶ Mikik V., Arnikov A., Kuzmanovska G., Jordanov Z. Report on the bio-behavioral study among “Men having sex with men” population in Skopje, Macedonia 2013-2014. – Skopje, 2014



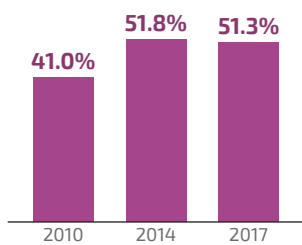


Fig. 4 Percentage of MSM who used a condom during last anal sexual intercourse with a man, IBBS data

A study on internalized homonegativity (2017) showed that this indicator rose to 55%¹⁷.

It is possible to estimate trends in condom use with different types of partners based on the results of the 2010⁶ and 2014¹⁶ IBBS data.

Condom use among MSM when last having anal sex with a casual partner increased: from 36% in 2010 to 46.8% in 2014. At the same time, condom use with regular partners decreased slightly: from 36.2% in 2010 to 26.6% in 2014.

The proportion of MSM involved in commercial sex decreased between 2010 and 2014: by 13% among those who paid for sex, and by 16.8% among those who provided sex for money. The percentage of MSM using a condom with commercial partners increased significantly: from 30.7% in 2010 to 83.7% in 2014.

Among MSM providing sex for money, 43.1% used a condom when last having sex with a client (compared to 40.3% in 2010). At the same time, the proportion of those who do this regularly has decreased significantly, from 34.6% in 2010 to 15.5% in 2014.

It should be noted that a significant proportion of MSM indicated that they had sex with women in the previous 12 months: 65% in 2014.

In comparison to 2010, a higher percentage of MSM indicated that they received free condoms in the previous 12 months: 52.8% in 2010⁶ compared to 82% in 2014¹⁶.

Despite the positive trends with respect to condom use, there is evidence that condoms for MSM in North Macedonia are relatively unavailable: only 46% of MSM have never had problems with condoms availability, while 54% of MSM did not have a condom when needed during the last month or previous year¹⁷.

The main barriers for MSM when seeking HIV prevention services include fear that confidentiality will not be maintained, the attitudes of health workers, and the fact that not all services are available in certain regions¹⁸.

Discrimination towards LGBT People

The results of the European MSM Internet Survey (EMIS) (2010) indicated that North Macedonia is one of the European countries with the lowest proportion of MSM who have disclosed their sexual orientation to their family and friends (13.6%)¹⁰.

At the same time, a study on internalized homonegativity showed that North Macedonia has the lowest level of internalized homonegativity among the 13 countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe¹⁷.

Stigma and discrimination towards LGBT people are widespread in the country¹⁹. Norms accepted by the majority prevail in society. A 2015 study indicated that 89% of the country's population does not accept same-sex relationships^{19,20}.

Stigma and homophobia are present among those who provide medical and social services, as well as among representatives of law enforcement agencies¹⁰.

There is evidence of attacks on LGBT activists²⁰. 27% of the LGBT community indicated that they were physically abused due to their sexual orientation or gender identity²⁰. A significant number of incidents of discrimination towards LGBT people arose during interactions with the police.

North Macedonia lacks the political will to ensure and protect the rights of LGBT people. There is no legal framework for protecting people from violence and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation¹³.

¹⁷ Shestakovskiy O., Kasianczuk M. Study of Internalized Homonegativity (Internal Homophobia) : Analytical report / Eurasian Coalition on Male Health (ECOM). – Tallinn, 2018. – 150 p.

¹⁸ HIV prevention report card for men who have sex with men Macedonia. – Mode of access to the resource: http://hera.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/ippf_hivreportcards_msm_macedonia_web_eng.pdf

¹⁹ Being LGBTI in Eastern Europe: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Country report, national LGBTI report. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/undp-rbec-blee-%20The%20former%20Yugoslav%20Republic%20of%20Macedonia.pdf>

²⁰ LGBTI Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://www.lgbti-era.org/content/macedonia>



Trans people are the most vulnerable to incidents of discrimination.

In addition, trans people do not have access to the services they need, such as hormone therapy provided under the supervision of a doctor, or surgical sex change procedures. In the past few years, several trans people have initiated sex change procedures¹⁹.

As medical services related to sex change procedures are not recognized by the Ministry of Health and by the Health Insurance Fund in North Macedonia, trans people seek out these services in private medical institutions in North Macedonia, or abroad, most often in neighboring Serbia. In both cases, surgical procedures must be fully covered at their own expense, which may not be financially feasible¹³.

The Role of the Community in Combating HIV

HIV prevention services are provided through cooperation between governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations. The NGO "EGAL" has been working exclusively with MSM since 2003 and provides HIV prevention services in four cities. "LGBTI Support Center" provides support, psychological and legal services for MSM and trans people.

NGOs work in cooperation with each other, and form special platforms to improve the HIV response in the country.

For example, 16 NGOs working in the field of HIV created a platform for ensuring the sustainability of HIV prevention programs among vulnerable groups in North Macedonia. Participants of this platform played a key role in the transition from donor to state funding of HIV prevention programs²¹.

In 2018, the HIV platform will continue to be a key partner in combating HIV, and through state HIV agencies, will participate in standardizing HIV services, developing long-term, stable mechanisms for state funding of programs, as well as in strengthening the oversight of HIV programs at the national level²¹.

The Coalition "Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities" also acts as an NGO, uniting other organizations working in the areas of HIV advocacy and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups²².

Three community organizations working on HIV issues, EGAL (MSM group), Stronger Together (PLH group, whose membership and staff are more than 50% MSM), and STAR-STAR (CSWs group), created a consortium for joint work in the implementation of ECOM's Regional Program to increase the involvement and representation of LGBT/MSM in the HIV response²³.

Recommendations

- Expand programs of free condom distribution.
- Conduct informational and educational activities aimed at motivating MSM to have an HIV test and to use condoms consistently.
- Promote the availability of essential HIV services for trans people.
- Expand training activities for health workers of state institutions, and for the police on the specificities of working with MSM and to develop tolerant attitudes towards LGBT people.
- Promote the expansion of HIV prevention programs in rural regions.
- Make efforts to expand advocacy mechanisms in the field of HIV.
- Combine the efforts of NGOs to ensure the stable and sufficient funding of HIV prevention programs.
- Conduct informational campaigns in order to increase the level of tolerant/neutral attitudes in society towards LGBT people.

Nadiya Semchuk

²¹ HERA 2017 Annual Report. – Mode of access to the resource: https://issuu.com/h.e.r.a./docs/godishen_izveshtaj_2017_web_ang_fin

²² ID OF THE COALITION. – Mode of access to the resource: <http://coalition.org.mk/za-nas/>

²³ Stuiykyte R. & al. MSM and trans* community participation in HIV decision-making process in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Macedonia : Baseline assessment commissioned by ECOM within the framework of the GFATM program "Right to Health"/ R. Stuiykyte, D. Kamaldinov, K. Kepuladze, S. Chikhladze, M. Kasianczuk (Eurasian Coalition on Male Health). – Tallinn, 2018. – 39 p. – Mode of access to the resource: http://ecom.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FINAL_Report_Part_study_en_compressed.pdf

