

ECOM's Statement on Assign the Status of "Foreign Agent" to the "Phoenix PLUS" NGO, Russia

On the eve of World AIDS Day, the Russian authorities decided to help in the fight against the pandemic in their own way. The Ministry of Justice of the Oryol Region in Russia proposed to assign the status of a "foreign agent" to the "Phoenix PLUS" nongovernmental organization which has been working on HIV prevention among vulnerable groups for 14 years and received the UNAIDS Red Ribbon Award in 2008.

The status of "foreign agent" requires that NGOs be included in a special registry of the Ministry of Justice, stamp their materials with a special mark, provide quarterly reports of the funding they receive, and publish information about their funding.

In 2020, the theme for World AIDS Day is "Global Solidarity — Shared Responsibility", but the actions of the Russian authorities in relation to "Phoenix Plus" are in direct opposition to this common call.

As of 30 September, 2020, 1,476,023 citizens in Russia were registered with a diagnosis of HIV infection, including 1,097,182 Russians currently living with an HIV diagnosis, and 378,841 people who have died. According to official statistics, only 2.5% of patients became infected during homosexual contacts. However, many NGOs consider these statistics to be underestimated.

This is not the first time that a Russian HIV-service organization working with key populations has been deemed a foreign agent. In 2016, the Andrey Rylkov Foundation in Moscow and the "Sibalt" Center in Omsk were labeled as foreign agents. In 2018, the St. Petersburg organization "Action", which was closely involved in HIV prevention among MSM, also received this status.

ECOM's analysis of law enforcement practices in relation to LGBT people in the Russian Federation during the period in which the so-called "gay propaganda law" has been in force, as well as the introduction of the concept of "foreign agents" for NGOs, indicate a systematic tightening of legal barriers to the HIV service provision by NGOs and for the LGBT community in the country. The 2012 Federal law on "regulation of the activities of NGOs performing the functions of a foreign agent" is used to effectively censor and restrict the work of NGOs. In the context of a state-sponsored homophobia, HIV-service organizations that provide vital services to gay men, other MSM and trans* people, are bound to fall victim to the law on foreign agents. This case involving the proposal to include "Phoenix Plus" in this registry is yet another confirmation of this.

ECOM calls upon the Russian authorities to abandon the proposal to label the non-governmental organization "Phoenix PLUS" as a foreign agent.

ECOM calls upon government bodies in all EECA countries to stop fighting against NGOs that are involved in combating the HIV epidemic, and to instead help these living, working civil society bodies, which are actually partners, and not opponents, of the state in the social sphere.

ECOM calls upon all partners to not remain silent about the problems related to the spread of HIV in countries and communities, but rather to speak openly about them, and to engage in dialogue and cooperation in order to strengthen our shared responsibility in the fight against the epidemic.

