



Alliance  
for Public Health

**DENIAL,  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
VIOLATIONS,  
AUTHORITARIAN  
GOVERNMENTS  
IN EECA ARE  
FUELLING HIV  
EPIDEMIC  
IN THE REGION**

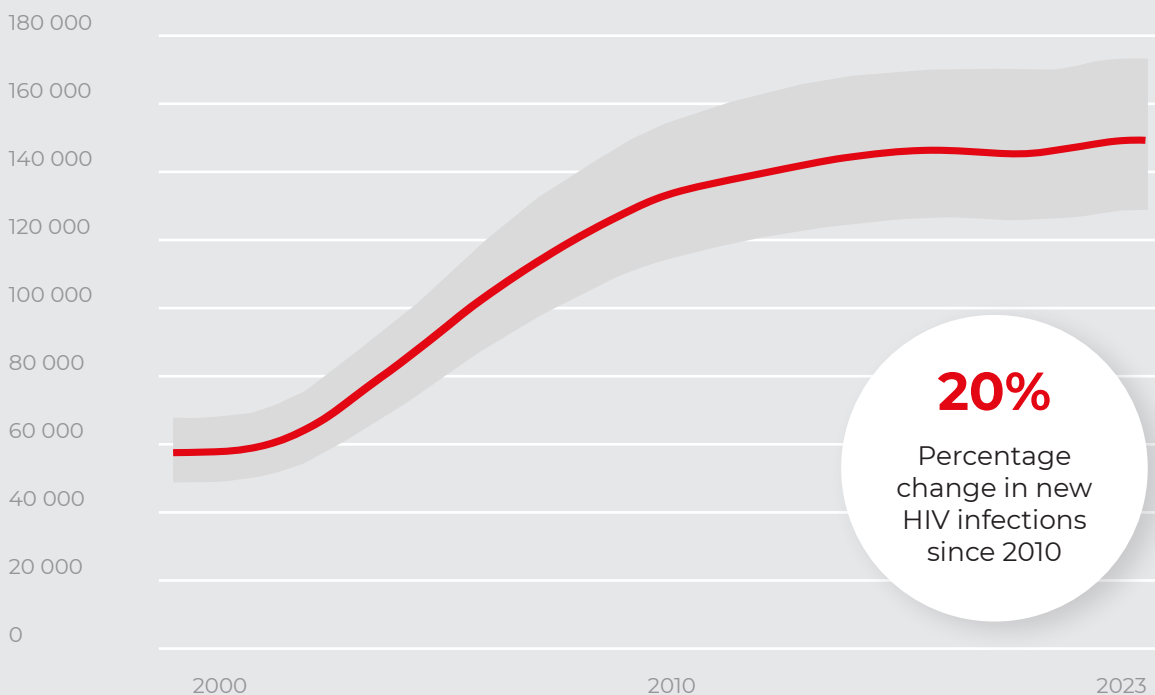
With important  
exceptions!



# 1. HIV GROWS IN THE EECA REGION

- **EECA is just one of two regions globally where HIV epidemic continues to grow.** In 2023, there were **140,000 cases** in the region, which is **20% more** than in 2020. Since 2010 deaths related to AIDS have **increased by 34%**, accounting for the fastest-growing rate worldwide.
- This is due to low coverage with essential services in EECA, as few as **50% of PLHIV accessing ART!**
- Four countries – Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan – account for 92% of all new registered HIV cases in the region.

*Numbers of new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths, Eastern Europe and central Asia, 2000–2023*



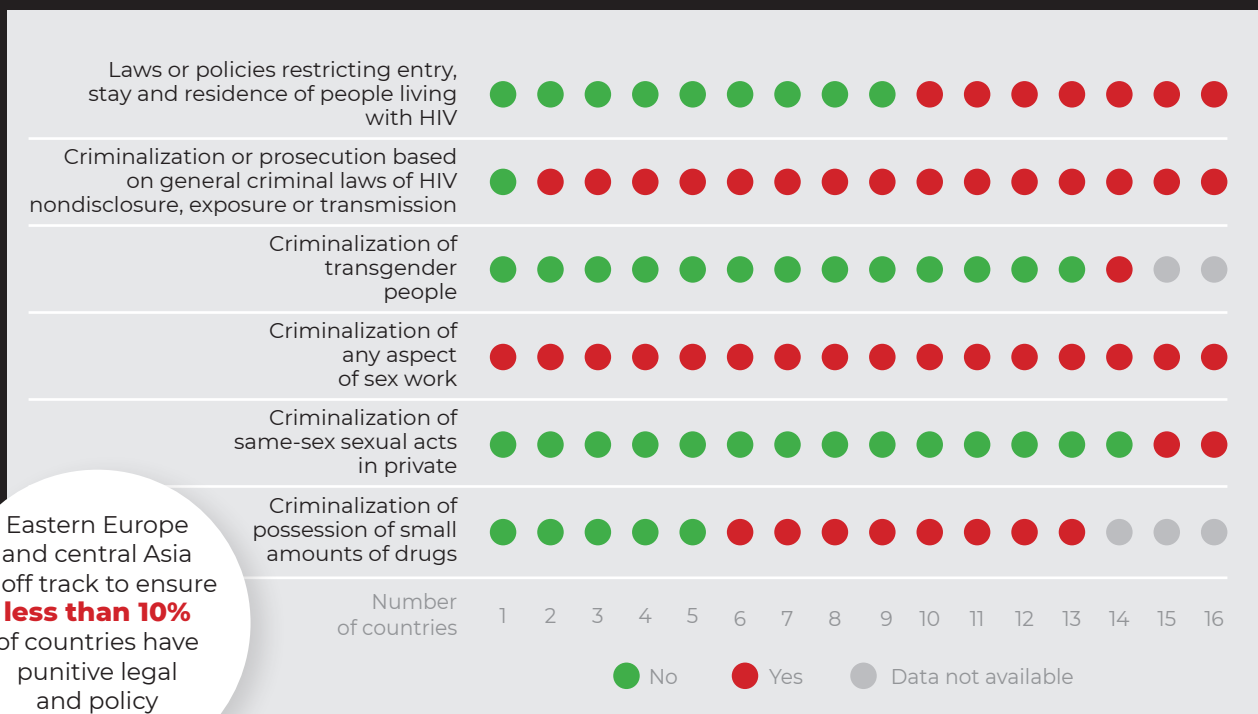
Source: UNAIDS epidemiological estimates, 2024 (<https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>)

## 2. DENIAL, HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS, AUTHORITARIANISM IN EECA REGION ARE THE REASONS FOR HIV EPIDEMICS GROWTH

Coverage by essential HIV interventions in EECA is hindered due to structural barriers to access to services, such as restrictive laws, shrinking space to civil society, denial of services to key groups.

### 2.1. Legal limitations to KP access to health services are restricting service coverage to those most in need

Essentially, barriers, including the criminalization of possessing small amounts of drugs for personal use in almost half of the countries in the region (44%), create obstacles to accessing services and treatment. In 16 countries, sex work is criminalised. In 15 countries, there are criminal penalties for hiding a positive HIV status and for transmitting HIV.



Source: UNAIDS epidemiological estimates, 2024 (<https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>)

## 2.2. Restricting civil society is cutting essential access

In the key populations driven concentrated epidemics communities are the key to lead and direct HIV response. Civil Society Organisations should have the full freedom and possibility to reach out with low threshold non-discriminatory services to those hardest to reach. But in many authoritarian government this is being controlled and the communities remain cut off from friendly services. Unfortunately, Russia imposed foreign agent laws have limited services to key populations not only in the country itself, but also the countries it tried to influence.



### Hungary:

So-called sovereignty protection act, approved in December 2023, has also been likened to Russia's legislation; it created a government authority assisted by the Hungarian secret services that has the power to gather information on foreign-funded organizations. The European Commission has stated that Hungary's act "violates several provisions" of EU law and threatens the fundamental human rights of EU citizens, such as freedom of expression.



### Kyrgyzstan:

In April 2024, the President of Kyrgyzstan signed the Amendment to the Law on Non-Commercial Organizations (also known as the law on foreign representatives), which is in many ways similar to the Russian law on "foreign agents".



### Russia:

In 2012, Russia adopted a foreign agents law which has been used repeatedly to crack down on independent civil society and opposition, closing organizations and jailing dissenters. Over the past several years, there has been a proliferation of Russian-style foreign agents laws in other countries which, while justified as providing transparency for foreign funding and influence, in reality are used to control and restrict civil society. They are implemented in a climate of increasing repression of civil society, including NGOs, human rights activists, independent media, and election observers.



### Bosnia and Herzegovina:

The proposed in May 2024 «Agents of foreign influence» bill was aimed at NGOs and other organizations that deal with political activities or that attempt to influence public opinion and those that «violate the integrity and constitution of the Republika Srpska.» Fortunately, The Bosnian Serb assembly has abruptly pulled the controversial bill from the agenda, citing the need for 'further harmonisation' with European standards.



### Slovakia:

In April, 2024 coalition representatives in the Slovak parliament proposed amendments to the law on non-governmental organizations, requiring NGOs that receive more than 5,000 euros annually in foreign funding to be labeled as «organizations with foreign support.



### Georgia:

Enacted on August 1, 2024 the law requires NGOs that receive 20%+ of their funding from abroad to officially register themselves as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power." Failure to register by September 1, 2024 could result in fines of up to \$9,300. Private individuals can be held criminally liable for concealing information about foreign agents or assisting in their activities.

## 2.3. OAT restrictions are denying access to critical HIV prevention and care to a key affected group

Trying to control personal freedoms - of choice, of decisions over own body - is another dangerous feature of repressive policies. Russian federation has denied the public health approach to drug dependence and has been popularising repressive abstinence-based and incarceration policies towards people with additions. Due to this, in most countries of EECA region OAT coverage is very low and doesn't respond to the actual needs of people who use drugs. Existing drug user's registries in most countries of CEECA region create a high barrier in accessing life-saving programmes.



### Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan:

OAT is prohibited due to claims that it does nothing but sustain an addiction, only transitioning to legal drugs.

### Georgia:

Take-home dosages are not possible anymore, even though during Covid times it was accessible. At least 10 people were rejected to take OAT to home or hospital. According to REAct data, Since the beginning of 2024, there have been 5 reported cases where participants in the methadone program were taken directly from the site entrance for biological testing. Seven individuals were unjustifiably denied enrollment in the pharmacotherapy program. Additionally, 28 cases involved conflicts between methadone participants and the police, including unlawful detention, searches, and threats to remove them from the program.

### Kazakhstan:

There is a risk of closure of OAT pilot programme and shortage of OAT medications, as a group of opponents has been actively campaigning for its closure. Following an order from the Head of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated December 23, 2023, and in accordance with the Ministry of Health's regulations, approved by the Government of Kazakhstan on February 17, 2017, a Working Group was established to analyze the implementation of OAT in Kazakhstan. Opponents of the program, taking advantage of their official positions, conducted monitoring visits to OAT clinics in various cities across Kazakhstan to gather arguments for its closure. However, the Kazakh government has currently decided to continue the implementation of Opioid Agonist Therapy, after urgent country visit of the EECA Drug Policy Commissioners.

## 2.4. Violating LGBTIQ community rights are not only personal tragedies, but also epidemic drivers

Stigmatizing and condemning minority communities is a dangerous way to blame the most vulnerable and deny access to health services. Harsh policies towards LGBTQI in EECA are not only fuelling thousands of personal tragedies, but are also the reasons behind growing HIV epidemics.

### Georgia:

In April 2024, in the run-up to parliamentary elections, Georgia's ruling party tabled a draft constitutional law titled «On the Protection of Family Values and Minors» aimed at banning “LGBT propaganda” and prohibiting any public gatherings, products, or educational programs that «promote,» among other things, same-sex marriages, adoption, and gender transition.

### Kyrgyzstan:

On August 14 2023, the President of Kyrgyzstan signed a law protecting children from harmful information. They introduce responsibility “for the dissemination of information harmful to children” including for LGBT propaganda and SRH activities, de-facto banning any public discussion of the LGBT community and wrongly characterizing information about ‘non-traditional sexual relationships’ as harmful to children.

### Kazakhstan:

In June, 2024 the Ministry of Culture and Information started considering the petition “We are against open and concealed LGBT propaganda in Kazakhstan!”, initiated by the head of the public association Kazakhstan Parents' Union. The petition calls on the authorities of Kazakhstan to pass a law prohibiting open and concealed LGBT propaganda and introduce fines for such materials in order to “protect children.” As for now, petition has already passed the second public hearing and can lead to the development of the Draft Law.

### Bulgaria

The amendment to the country's education code, which was introduced by the far-right, pro-Russian Revival party and unexpectedly backed by pro-European Union parties, prohibits the “propaganda, promotion, or incitement” of LGBTQ+ “ideas and views” in schools, without specifying further details. It passed by a large majority in parliament on Aug. 7 2024 and led to protests across Bulgaria over the weeks. Human rights activists have called on the EU to clamp down on Bulgaria.

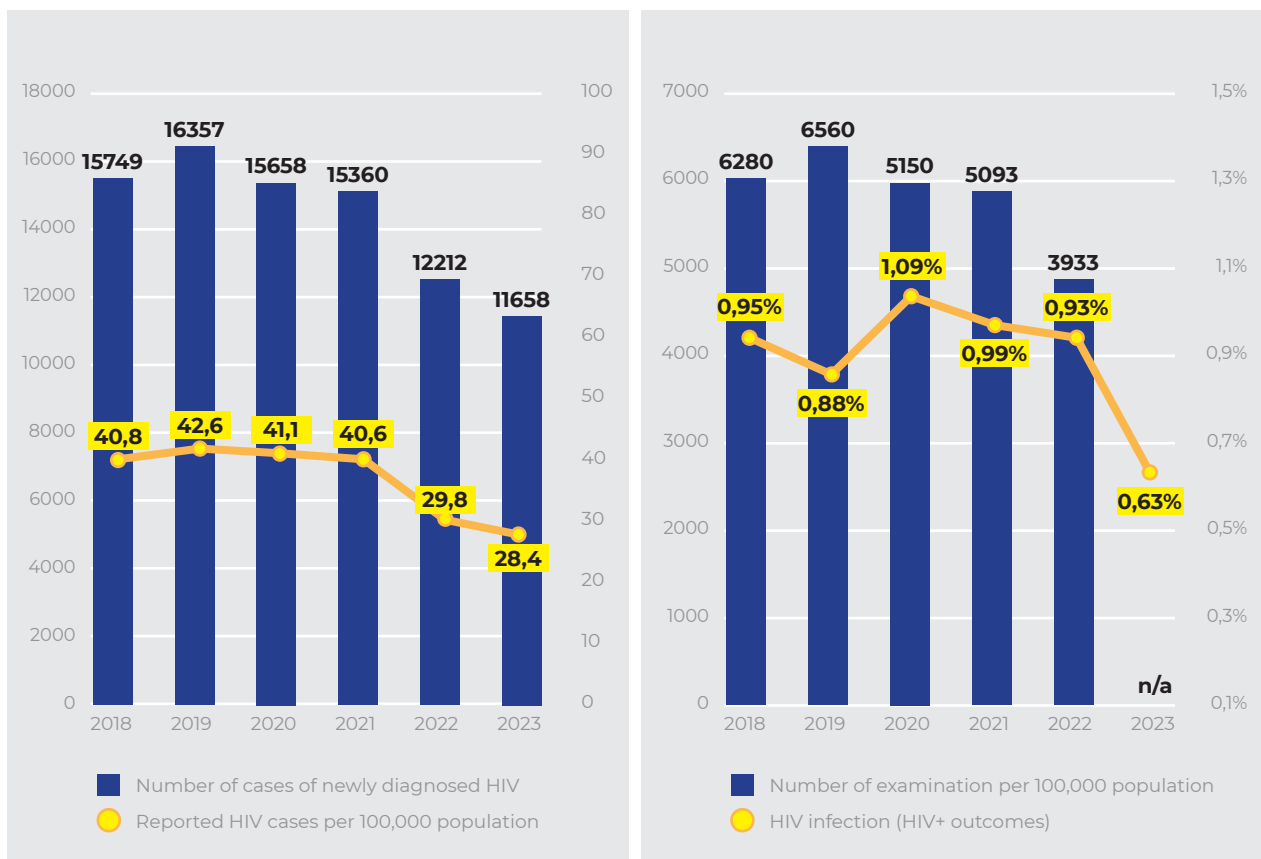
### Tajikistan

Recent developments indicate a worrying trend of escalating attacks on civil liberties, persecution of human rights defenders, and discrimination against marginalized groups, particularly the LGBTIQ community. The past years, notably the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024, have witnessed a surge in threats to human rights defenders in Tajikistan. Fabricated cases under Articles 238, 239, and 241 of the Criminal Code (Distribution of pornography) have been utilized as tools for persecution, with activists unjustly targeted and imprisoned. The use of personal photos obtained through illegal searches to fabricate cases is a grave violation of privacy and due process. The case of Equal Opportunities NGO is particularly distressing. The last openly operated organization, which provided health-related services to MSM community, faced unwarranted inspections, threats and physical attacks on office. Despite filing police reports, seeking legal recourse and support from international donors, the organization's work was forcibly suspended by court decision that “organization is promoting sex services to men, which is contrary to country (moral) norms”. The consequences of the persecution extend beyond the immediate victims, affecting access to healthcare and legal support for marginalized communities. Fear of discrimination and persecution has led to reluctance among MSM and trans individuals to seek essential services, including HIV testing and prevention. Moreover, the reluctance of legal professionals to represent individuals from the LGBTIQ community in criminal cases further exacerbates their vulnerability and denies them access to justice.

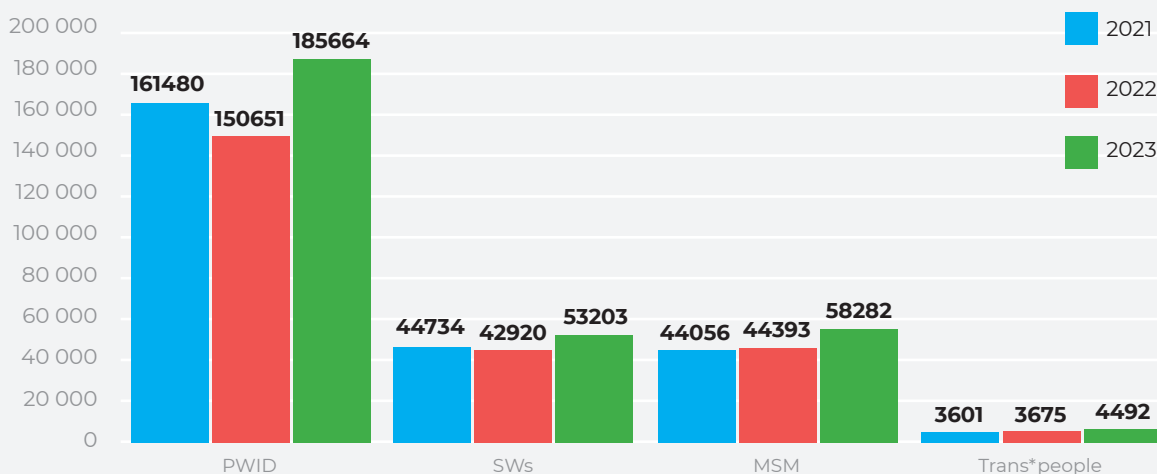
### 3. IN CONTRARY: Ukraine is expanding HIV programs amidst the Russian war and has HIV epidemic under control

Since its independence, Ukraine has offered an important alternative to repressive and denying harsh policies to public health and human rights in EECA. Ukraine has taken the approach of full openness to the HIV epidemic situation and understanding of people's true situation and needs. Ukraine acknowledged the rights of key groups in responding and driving the responses and has vastly relied on community leadership. These approaches have proved efficient in controlling HIV epidemic even in the case of war and has made the country the example to follow and replicate in EECA.

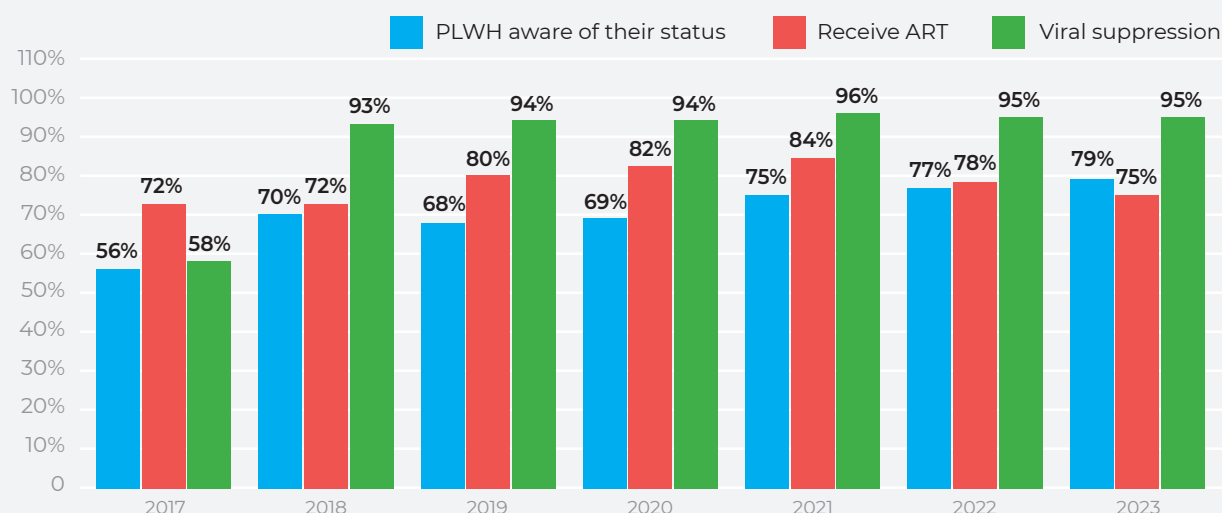
*HIV situation in Ukraine under control - at war!*



**HIV epidemic control in Ukraine was made possible due to expanding KP coverage by HIV prevention programs on GCA of Ukraine during 2021-2023 at wartime (SYREX database data)**



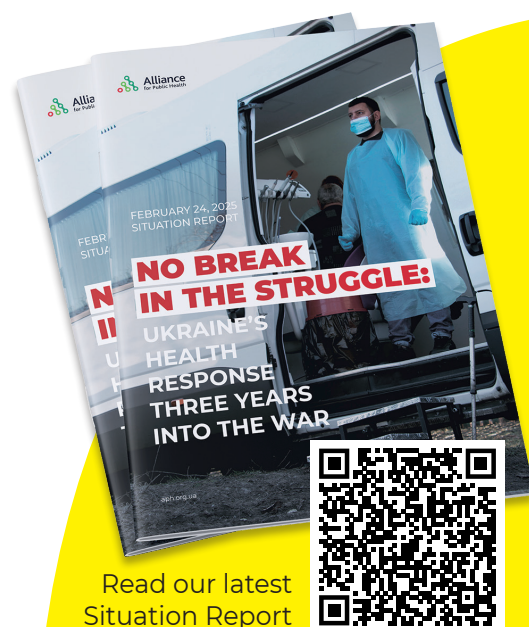
**Medical care cascade for PLWH in Ukraine continues to improve at war due to Ukraine democratic public health and human rights based policies**



## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Autocratic regimes restrict human rights and harm essential backbones of HIV and HCV response in PWID such as civil society, community, OAT. This fuels new HIV infections.

Ukraine has shown the regional way to open-minded, community-driven, person-centered and innovative programming which have led to controlling and reducing HIV epidemic among PWID including in the war situation.



Read our latest Situation Report

