

About the situation in EHRN

August 23, 2017

Dear Colleagues,

The Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN) is currently experiencing a crisis related to the change of its co-owners. The organization has found itself in a situation where the fate of a network with more than 600 members from 29 countries in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA) region depends on the decision of two people and the successful implementation of its strategy and programs may be at risk.

Established in 1997 as a network of harm reduction organizations from the region, EHRN was registered in Lithuania in 2001 as a public organization by its two founders or ‘owners,’ Emilis Subata and Ingrida Sulciene. This form of registration, without a membership structure, was chosen as the most flexible and feasible under Lithuanian law at that time.

The Steering Committee, convened in 2001, established the Secretariat of the network, which currently employs approximately 25 staff members on a regular and freelance basis. The organization worked successfully with this structure until 2015, when Ingrida Sulciene tried to sell her share of the ownership of the organization which led to a drawn-out lawsuit between the co-owners and which in its turn led to the replacement of one of them in August 2017. The businessman, Linas Merkelis became a new co-owner of the organization.

Additionally, in August of this year, the new pair of co-owners of the organization dismissed the Executive Director of EHRN, Anna Dovbakh, from her position. Vytautas Sulcas, the husband of Ingrida Sulciene (one of co-owners), was appointed as the new EHRN Executive Director. This appointment took place without consulting the EHRN Steering Committee.

The actions of the co-owners including: the groundless dismissal of Anna Dovbakh from the position of Executive Director and appointment of a relative of one of the co-owners to this position; as well as the confiscation of several office computers; the intimidation and unlawful retention of employees in the office for several hours on August 17, 2017; resulted in interference with the implementation of EHRN’s activities and with the effective coordination of its work with partners.

The pressure that the co-owners put on staff and their unacceptable behavior, which was unethical and contradictory to the norms of civil society is a signal that they do not intend to fulfill the mission and strategy of EHRN approved by the Steering Committee and might try to

use the organization's reputation and available resources for personal purposes to the detriment of members, partners and donors of EHRN.

In response to this situation, on August 20, 2017, the EHRN Steering Committee, together with EHRN Secretariat staff, sent a letter to the co-owners of the organization and the new Executive Director demanding that everything possible be done to ensure that the organization will continue to fulfill its obligations to the members of the network, to its donors and partners, and most importantly to clients of harm reduction programs, whose life and well-being depend on the outcomes of projects implemented by EHRN. To date, on August 23, 2017, the members of the Steering Committee have not yet received an official response to their letter. In addition, two computers of Secretariat employees that were illegally seized have not been returned yet.

For 16 years, the EHRN Secretariat has worked in accordance with the network's mission and implemented the network's strategy – a strategy that was developed and approved by its Steering Committee, which was comprised of people democratically elected by members of the network. All projects undertaken by the network and all the procedures for administrative and program activities of the network were employed to fulfill the mission and strategy of the organization in the best way and in accordance with the principles of the work of organizations in the non-profit sector.

With this statement, we would like to inform you that, in the current situation, the EHRN Steering Committee and the staff of the EHRN Secretariat are doing everything possible to: ensure that the program activities of the network continue according with approved plans on time and in full; and prevent the violation financial and administrative procedures by the co-owners of the organization or its new Executive Director.

We are confident that, acting in a coordinated manner, we will be able to uphold the principles of EHRN and preserve the reputation of this regional network which has supported harm reduction activists in 29 CEECA countries for 20 years. The EHRN Secretariat and the Steering Committee are working constantly to find a way out from this crisis and create a new organizational framework to continue our mission. We will keep you informed about the developments!

The EHRN Steering Committee
The EHRN Secretariat