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**Keynote speech by Mrs. Aleksandra Blagojevic, IPU representative,
at the Regional Consultation on Universal Access to HIV Prevention,
Treatment, Care and Support in Europe and Central Asia
*Kiev, 16-18 March 2011***

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning everybody. I am delighted to be with you in Kiev this morning to contribute to this important consultation on universal access.

Today I would like to speak to you about three themes:

1. The role of parliaments in the HIV response
2. Legislative action on HIV and AIDS with a focus on Eastern Europe and Central Asia
3. The role of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in strengthening parliamentary action on HIV and AIDS

Parliaments and their members have important responsibilities in helping to curb the spread of the HIV epidemic. One of their most important roles is to ensure that legislation protects human rights. Legislation should advance, rather than hinder, effective HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Examples of such parliamentary action include legislation that prohibits discrimination against people living with HIV and those most vulnerable to the infection, legislation to ensure the rights of school-age children to be educated on how to protect themselves from HIV as they grow older, laws that guarantee harm reduction services and many others.

Broadly speaking, the number of parliaments that have adopted legislation that supports effective HIV interventions is increasing. However, many countries still have laws, regulations or policies that present obstacles to effective HIV prevention, treatment, care and support for the populations most vulnerable to HIV. Laws criminalizing the behaviour of injecting drug users, sex workers and men who have sex with men also represent a significant legal impediment to more widespread implementation of harm reduction programs. The IPU firmly believes that repealing or amending those laws would create a more favourable environment for effective HIV responses, and this is the belief that underpins our work.

There is also a disturbing tendency for the law to make transmission of the HIV virus a criminal offence. There is no sound reason to believe that applying criminal law to HIV transmission will either ensure that justice is done or prevent transmission of the virus. The IPU believes that before rushing to legislate, parliaments should give careful consideration to the fact that passing HIV-specific criminal legislation can further stigmatize people living with HIV. It can provide a disincentive to testing, create a false sense of security among people who are HIV-negative, and - for women - impose an additional risk of violence or discrimination.

The parliamentarians from Eastern Europe and Central Asia have recognized the importance of their leadership on HIV and AIDS. In some countries - like Russia - MPs have formed cross-party parliamentary groups to advance the HIV-related issues in the work of their parliaments. The parliamentarians from the region have met in a number of conferences to discuss the challenges posed by HIV and AIDS and develop inter-parliamentary dialogue on the issue. In other words, the issue is on the regional parliamentary agenda.

However, despite the activism, a lot remains to be done to make national legislation human rights- and evidence-based. Most countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have punitive laws that criminalize HIV transmission in all circumstances as well as the behavior of vulnerable groups. In the region whose HIV epidemic is driven by drug use, the text of the law remains a significant impediment to the provision of effective harm reduction services. Some countries, most recently Ukraine, have adopted very courageous legislation in the fight against the HIV virus and legalized harm reduction services for people who inject drugs. We hope that these laws will set a standard in the region in the years to come.

The IPU is currently assisting parliaments to deal with these difficult issues through its Advisory Group on HIV and AIDS, a small group of qualified MPs from all corners of the globe that is working hard to raise awareness of the need for sound legislation. The Advisory Group provides members of parliament with access to relevant policy expertise and skills to properly exercise their duties of lawmaking, oversight, leadership and advocacy. Special attention is paid to the objective of achieving universal access to treatment, prevention, care and support, and the protection of rights as a prerequisite for meeting the MDG 6 targets.

One of the activities of the Advisory Group is to open communication channels between legislators and the non-governmental sector. At the end of 2010 the IPU joined with the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in setting up a regional seminar that brought together for the first time members of parliament and civil society working on HIV and AIDS. The seminar triggered useful exchanges and set the stage for stronger collaboration between parliamentarians, civil society, people living with HIV and relevant institutions at the national and regional levels.

Another area where the Advisory Group is taking action concerns HIV-related restrictions on entry, stay and residence. Last year, the IPU governing bodies adopted recommendations calling for a complete elimination of HIV-related travel restrictions, opening the way for legislative reform which will bring this discrimination to an end. Since then, China and Namibia have repealed or amended their legislation. We hope that the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia that still impose these restrictions will join the growing list of countries that have lifted travel restrictions for non-nationals living with HIV.

The IPU also works to mobilize parliamentary involvement in major international HIV/AIDS events. It gathered over a hundred members of parliament and staff in a parliamentary briefing organized on the occasion of last year's International AIDS Conference in Vienna, and is now working to ensure that legislators make their presence felt at the major UN HIV/AIDS review meeting in New York in June.

For the IPU HIV is an eminently political question and the organization remains committed to helping members of parliament create the right legal environment to respond effectively to HIV and AIDS.

Thank you.