

EDITORIAL

Russia: A key partner in the Northern Dimension Partnership

Valery Chernyavskiy¹, Julia Mikhailova¹

¹Federal Research Institute for Health Organization and Informatics of the Russian Ministry of Health, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Corresponding author: Dr. Valery Chernyavskiy PhD, MPH, Dr.h.c., Deputy Head of the Unit for coordination of the Northern Dimension Partnership of Public Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS), Federal Research Institute for Health Organization and Informatics of the Russian Ministry of Health;

Address: 11, Dobrolubova Str. Moscow, 127254, Russian Federation;

E-mail: vch@mednet.ru.

Nearly thirty years after the breakdown of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, the countries of the former USSR that emerged from it still face a multitude of challenges including the need to reorganise the health services, their structure, budgeting, staffing, and quality.

The Soviet system, despite its many and profound flaws, represented also very real achievements (1-3). It provided a basis for community health activities including mandatory immunization and periodic health checks and it fostered a generation committed to solidarity in the provision of health care aiming at universal coverage and equitable access.

Despite the enormous challenges facing the country today, the belief in a health system centred on need rather than the ability to pay remains intact. However, the Russian Federation - by far the biggest successor state of the former USSR - carries most of the advantages as well as disadvantages of the Soviet past (4). Today, we observe a growing awareness of the necessity to increase the efficiency of the health system and a real desire to enhance user satisfaction in Russia.

These concerns coupled with recognition of the need to address issues of sustainability have prompted a major reform of the health system centred on appropriate financing mechanisms: funding which previously came from general taxation has shifted in part to a social insurance system and it is this shift which provides the fundament for the health reform process of the Russian Federation (5,6).

Two additional problems add to the need for change:

- There is a major impact of environmental pollution on the health of the population, to a considerable degree caused by the historical break-down of central regulation and enforcement of health and safety standards in the

nineties which allowed the industry to produce without regard to air and water pollution.

- Equally worrying is the unhealthy behaviour of Russian citizens especially with regard to the high alcohol and cigarette consumption and poor nutritional status, i.e. high levels of energy intake from fat instead of vegetables and fruits (7). The subsequent deterioration of major health indicators foresees a long-term rise of morbidity and mortality of the present generations and correspondingly a very high burden of disease to be tackled by the health system.

Therefore, today, one of the key areas of work of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation is to strengthen the cooperation with experts from other countries in order to set up channels for exchange of knowledge and experience between health professionals, politicians and decision-makers (8).

The Northern Dimension Partnership on Public Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS) as a cooperative effort of ten governments (Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russian Federation and Sweden), the European Commission and eight international organisations was formally established at a ministerial-level meeting on 27 October, 2003. Since then, the Northern Dimension is steadily on track to reduce the Preventable Years of Life Lost in their respective populations and the difference between the member countries with reference to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region 2020.

From the very beginning, the Russian Federation has been actively involved in the cooperative work of the NDPHS. Summing up the contributions of the Russian Federation from 2003 until 2018,

the following three periods can be differentiated (9).

i. The period from 2003 to 2009

This was the period of foundation of the Partnership, the searching for its purpose and place in the international, as well as regional agenda of public health and social well-being. At the various international platforms, Russia actively participated in discussions about the feasibility, goals, status, and mission of the new international network for regional cooperation at the Northern Dimension area.

ii. The period from 2010 to 2014

During this period, the general goal of the Partnership was determined, the first Strategy was adopted (but, still, without an Action Plan), and objectives were defined. In accordance with the general goal of the Partnership, two priority areas were identified:

- To reduce the spread of major communicable diseases and to prevent life-style related non-communicable diseases;
- To enhance peoples' levels of social well-being and to promote socially rewarding lifestyles.

To implement actions in these directions, terms of reference were developed and four Expert Groups were created, in which international experts from the ten partner countries including Russia worked together. This period allowed the partner countries to outline common problems in health and to define mechanisms of interaction and cooperation.

During 2010-2011, the Partnership worked under the chairmanship of the Russian Federation. In this period, activities related to new challenges in the health of all partner countries were integrated: population aging, issues of prevention and control of non-communicable diseases - including cardiovascular diseases and

tumours as the main causes of mortality, the growth of resistance of microorganisms to antibacterial drugs, the increasing relevance of primary health care as an accessible, comprehensive, and high-quality, component of the health sector.

During this period, a NDPHS Secretariat with legal capacity was established, which is currently located in Stockholm, Sweden.

iii. The period from 2015 to 2018

A new NDPHS Strategy 2020 was developed and, corresponding to its objectives, an Action Plan was adopted, as well as terms of reference and tasks of the meanwhile six Expert Groups were established. The new NDPHS mission was formulated as an innovative regional cooperation network, making a significant contribution to improving the health and social well-being of the population in the Northern Dimension area. The current NDPHS Strategy 2020 is defined as a guiding tool to assist the partner countries and organizations in their joint efforts to achieve improvements in selected priority areas and to strengthen the recognition of health and social well-being on the political agenda in the Northern Dimension area and the Russian Federation, as well as ensuring greater stakeholder commitment to include aspects of health and quality of life in the process of developing national policies.

It is important to note the increasing relevance of the political components during this most recent period:

- Inclusion of the North-West Federal District of the Russian Federation into the zone of activity and responsibility of the Russian Federation in the NDPHS (until 2014 only the region of Kaliningrad participated in NDPHS activities). To determine the current problems in the health and healthcare of the North-West Federal District, the Federal Research Institute of Health Organization and

Informatics of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation carried out extensive work on assessing the health of the population and the capacity of the health care organization in the region.

– The new policy of the Northern Dimension placed a strong emphasis on cooperation between the European Union and Russia with full participation of Iceland and Norway in matters relating to the Northern Dimension region.

The Russian Federation has been actively involved in the NDPHS from the beginning (that is 15 years ago) in all areas of the Partnership. It should be emphasized that Russian experts are actively promoting many aspects of health and health care presented and discussed in the expert groups and transfer the insights gained into the national strategic documents for further development of the health system in Russia.

NDPHS now is at the stage of preparation the new Strategy 2025 based on the national priorities of the partners. In parallel, the President of Russia signed the

Decree “*On the national goals and strategic objectives of the development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2024*”. Based on the analysis of global and national trends and conditions in the years to come, the new policy indicates the trajectory of economic, social, and technological break-through, sustainable growth of well-being and competitiveness of individuals and the society as a whole on social and economic development.

At this historical turning point, it is expected that the European Union will likewise renew its Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EU-SBSR) including a re-evaluation of the financial investment in order to combine all efforts in the region efficiently. The complex but steady progress during 15 years shows that international cooperation at expert level may be slow but in the long run can become effective. The well-resourced northern and western countries and the European Union should realise their strategic interest in the unique platform of the Northern Dimension Partnership on Public Health and Social Well-being.

Conflicts of interest: None.

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