



## **Press Release: Europe's Leaders Approve Riga Declaration on TB and MDR-TB**

*Riga, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015* – At the conclusion of the first Eastern Partnership Ministerial Conference on Tuberculosis (TB) and Its Multidrug-Resistance (MDR-TB), the Tuberculosis Europe Coalition (TBEC) applauds the approval of the Riga Declaration by Ministers of Health, Finance and Social Affairs from across European Union Member States and Eastern Partnership countries.

TBEC would particularly like to congratulate the Latvian government for taking the initiative to organise this important meeting as part of their Presidency of the EU Council and the collaborative efforts of partners across Europe, including the World Health Organisation, ECDC, the European Commission, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, the Stop TB Partnership and civil society.

This meeting comes at a crucial time in the fight against TB and MDR-TB in Europe. The European region contends with the highest rates of multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) worldwide. Fifteen of the twenty-seven high MDR-TB burden countries in the world are situated in the region and four of these (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Bulgaria) are situated in the European Union. Currently, Europe is failing to tackle MDR-TB effectively. More than 50% of MDR-TB cases are not detected and less than half are cured. Without increased political and financial commitment, the number of MDR-TB cases in Europe could skyrocket, leading towards the apocalyptic scenario of rising costs and lost lives. TB and MDR-TB is already estimated to cost European economies an astonishing €6 billion a year.

“This meeting and the subsequent signing of this declaration is a step in the right direction for TB and MDR-TB in Europe. Today many of our political leaders have signified their commitment to ending this disease once and for all. As civil society, we will now work tirelessly to ensure that these commitments are followed through and the ambition is not lost. The Slovaks agreeing to keep it as a regional health priority during their EU Presidency is a fantastic opportunity to keep political momentum ” said Fanny Voitzwinkler, Head of Global Health Advocates EU Office and Coordinator of TBEC.

Despite these steps in the right direction, TBEC would like to express disappointment that not all European and Eastern Partnership countries sent high-level political representation. In particular, TBEC is concerned by the absence of Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis who had been expected at the conference but caused surprise when he pulled out just last week. The Commissioner however signalled strong support via a video message delivered to the Conference in which he recognised that underlying social factors of TB had to be addressed if we were going to win this fight. Most importantly, the Commissioner showed his backing for the Riga Declaration when stating that it “provides a solid foundation for the eradication of TB in Europe” and that the Commission will work jointly with countries to achieve this.

“The European Commission have reiterated several times during the conference their intention to work jointly with EU members states, neighbouring countries, the WHO and civil society in order to tackle TB effectively. This is significant. It is only with joint efforts that we will be able to push the agenda forward for TB elimination in Europe. I am pleased that the Health Commissioner has sent

this message of support and look forward to hearing in greater detail how they plan to work with all stakeholders in this fight,” said Lucica Ditiu, Executive Director of the UN Stop TB Partnership.

As Marina, a former MDR-TB patient from Romania, said in her opening speech: “We must redouble our efforts towards stopping the spread of the disease, and recommit ourselves to tackling this scourge that drains the life and saps the potential of so many.” TBEC believes that the approval of the Riga Declaration marks the first step in the redoubling of efforts. Those in attendance have now formalised their commitment to end TB as a public health problem in their respective countries and to strengthen and formalise regional collaboration on TB and MDR-TB at the highest political level.

Translating the approval of the Riga Declaration into concrete outcomes is now key. It will be crucial for attendees at the upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in May 2015 to endorse the aspirations of the Riga Declaration. Moreover, we reiterate the point made by Dr Hans Kluge, Director of the Division of Health Systems and Public Health, and Special Representative of the Regional Director to prevent and combat M/XDR-TB in the WHO European Region, that we now look forward to the next EU Presidencies of Luxembourg and Slovakia to the turn the outcomes of Riga into EU Council Conclusions.

**Editors Notes:**

The TB Europe Coalition is an informal advocacy network of non-governmental organisations and individuals that share a commitment to raising awareness of TB and to increasing the political will to control the diseases throughout the WHO European Region and worldwide; [www.tbcoalition.eu](http://www.tbcoalition.eu)

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