Copenhagen, 25 February 2015 - The WHO Regional Office for Europe calls on policy-makers, health care workers and parents immediately to step up vaccination against measles across age groups at risk. This will help to put an end to the outbreaks occurring in countries in the WHO European Region and to prevent similar outbreaks in the future.

Seven countries in the Region have reported 22 149 cases of measles in 2014 and thus far in 2015. This threatens the Region's goal of eliminating the disease by the end of 2015. Even though measles cases fell by 50% from 2013 to 2014, large outbreaks continue.

"When we consider that over the past two decades we have seen a reduction of 96% in the number of measles cases in the European Region, and that we are just a step away from eliminating the disease, we are taken aback by these numbers. We must collectively respond, without further delay, to close immunization gaps," says Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe. "It is unacceptable that, after the last 50 years' efforts to make safe and effective vaccines available, measles continues to cost lives, money and time."

Table 1 shows the number of cases reported; see the Appendix for details. Measles virus D8 has been the most commonly identified circulating genotype.

Table 1. Reported measles cases, 2014–2015

Country	Number of cases
Kyrgyzstan	7477
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5340
Russian Federation	3247
Georgia	3291
Italy	1674
Germany	583
Kazakhstan	537

Measles outbreaks continue to occur in Europe because there are pockets of susceptible people who are un- or underimmunized, particularly as growing numbers of parents either refuse to vaccinate their children or face barriers in accessing vaccination. Travel can increase the risk of exposure to measles virus and its spread into susceptible populations who are not vaccinated.

"The priority is now to control current outbreaks in all affected countries through immunization activities targeting people at risk," concludes Dr Nedret Emiroglu, Deputy Director of the Division of Communicable Diseases, Health Security and Environment at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. "At the same time, all countries, with no exception, need to keep a very high coverage of regular measles vaccination, so that similar outbreaks won't happen again in our Region, and measles can be eliminated once and for all."

The measures necessary to control the current outbreaks include:

- improving surveillance to detect and investigate all suspected cases;
- rapidly testing cases and identifying chains of transmission; and
- making high-quality evidence-based information available on the benefits and risks associated with immunization against measles.

To support European countries in these efforts, the WHO Regional Office for Europe launched a new European Vaccine Action Plan (EVAP), a regional interpretation of the Global Vaccine Action Plan. Acting as the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, Member States endorsed EVAP in September 2014. The Regional Office offers much more information on measles and rubella in the Region on its website, including reports of epidemiological data, a package of accelerated action for measles and rubella elimination and a framework for verifying the elimination process.