

# Unicef report highlights situation of children in E. Europe and the former Soviet Union: The terrible price of capitalist restoration

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About half a million young people aged 5-14 years of age, who lived in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at the time the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 are no longer alive.

This is the terrible outcome depicted by the Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy, in a study on behalf of the UN child welfare organisation, Unicef: *Young People in Changing Societies*. The investigation concentrates on the situation of 65 million young people aged between 15 and 24, belonging to the so-called "transition generation" in the 27 countries of Eastern Europe and the Confederation of Independent States (CIS—up until 1992 part of the Soviet Union).

While the cause of the terrible situation facing millions of children and young people, and naturally the population as a whole in this region, is not spelled out by the report's authors, the facts they bring together are an indictment of capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. (The complete report, with numerous diagrams and statistical material, is available in English and Russian, and also a summary in Italian, at <http://www.unicef-icdc.org/monee7/index.html>.)

In the preface, the authors point out that the transition from childhood to adulthood is without parallel for the generation that experienced it in the aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the associated economic and political changes: "Today's young people find that the institutions, resources and social norms that once smoothed the way from one generation to the next are either weak, in the process of fundamental change or non-existent."

Out of the entire juvenile population of the region under examination (some 65 million people) in 1999, 26 million (41 percent) were still at school or undertaking an apprenticeship, 21 million (32 percent) were working, and 18 million (27 percent) were neither in education nor employed.

In 1989 there were 67 million children aged between 5 and 14 living in the same region. About one million had left by 1999, but only very few of them were able to find better conditions in other parts of the world. Destitution and bitter poverty forced others into a life of drudgery or the sex trade. There were also large migrations within the region, mostly caused by economic shortages, ethnic conflicts or war. In most countries, more young people left than returned.

The authors estimate that about half a million children and young people of this generation died between 1989 and 1999, almost half in Russia alone. In 1998, 85,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 died, 30 percent more than in 1989. The mortality rate among young people rose in 11 states, particularly within the CIS; it fell in 16 countries, including the Baltic states and Eastern Europe. Differences between countries became larger. The danger of a young person dying was around three times greater in Russia and Kazakhstan in 1998 than in Slovakia, the Czech republic or in Hungary.

Most deaths among young people were caused by accidents, violence, homicide, suicide, infections, malnourishment, as well as problems associated with pregnancy and childbirth. That is, they were mainly due to social causes and could have been avoided under different social conditions.

The report establishes that of the countries examined, Russia has the highest rate of injuries leading to death—seven times higher than in the Netherlands. The report also emphasises that widespread poverty and weaker social cohesion has intensified problems that lead to bad health and risky behaviour, citing as examples unsatisfactory nutrition, hazardous sexual relations and drug abuse.

The increase in suicides among young people is the most extreme expression of widespread feelings of hopelessness and stress. While the rate sank in some "transition" countries among young men aged between 15 and 24, it rose in 16 countries. In Lithuania, White Russia, Russia and Turkmenistan it more than doubled. It is also particularly high (tendency rising) in Slovenia, Estonia the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. In the entire region, 10,000 males and 2,000 young females aged between 15 and 24 take their lives each year. A further 5,000 young men and 1,500 young women fall victim to murder.

The study condemns the lack of information or possibilities for consultation available to young people on health questions, which has become even worse since the collapse of the Stalinist regimes or no longer exist at all. Among other things, this finds its expression in a large increase in juvenile smokers and alcohol abusers. 10 percent of all 15-year-old girls and 22 percent of all boys of this age smoked regularly in 1993-94. Four years later, this had risen to 18 and 29 percent respectively. Substantially more young men smoke in these countries than in Western Europe.

The study also reveals frightening numbers involved in drug abuse. A study in 1999 found that of all 16-year-olds in Hungary, 25 percent had used various types of drugs. In the Ukraine, some 1,000 of 13,000 drug-dependent young people examined in the first three months of 1999 were found to be HIV positive, and had most probably infected themselves with AIDS when injecting drugs with dirty syringes.

While in 1995 there were only 12,000 known cases of HIV infection in all age groups in this region, at the end of 1998 there were already over 50,000 cases. The UN organization Unaid estimates that at the end of 1999 over 360,000 people had become infected with AIDS, with young people being the main sufferers. In Lithuania and the Czech republic, young people aged between 15 and 24 years form a third of all known HIV cases, and in White Russia they comprise two thirds.

## School and further education

The study paints an appalling picture in relation to school attendance and access to further education and training. The number of young people

aged 15 to 18 leaving school rose from six million in 1989 to nine million in 1998. More than one in three from this age group had left school or further education prematurely and without qualifications. There are differences between the various countries, with the Eastern European and Baltic states registering a modest rise in attendance of those in further education. All other countries in the region registered a strong decline, and particularly in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In Tajikistan, school attendance fell from 61 percent in 1989 to 24 percent in 1998; over the same period in Turkmenistan it fell from 68 percent to 30 percent.

Fewer children continue their education after High School, and leave at age 15 or earlier. While in 1989 almost all children graduated from High School, in the CIS the number graduating had dropped 10 to 20 percent by 1997. In some parts of Eastern Europe there was an even greater decline. Worst effected are Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, where the proportion of children finishing High School in 1997 was around 80 percent lower than in 1989.

The report points out that those affected most are young people from poor families, rural areas and ethnic minorities or those with handicaps. They comprise the bulk of those leaving school prematurely, and who have no chance of further education, let alone university.

The reasons are not only that poor children and their parents cannot pay school or study fees, lack cash for books and other costs of maintaining children in further education. Often children and young people quit school in order to contribute to their family's income to cover living costs.

Bad conditions for teachers throughout the region—in particular low pay—make the problem worse. For example, in Moldavia parents usually have to pay hundreds of US dollars in fees or bribes so their children are taught foreign languages, mathematics and the natural sciences.

The authors questioned young people throughout the region about the different areas under investigation. They cite 15-year-old Gairat in connection with school attendance: "Sometimes I look at my teacher and I feel sorry for her. I see that she cannot concentrate, is thinking about other things. And I wish that she did not have to worry about all these everyday cares. That she had enough money to concentrate on doing her job and teaching us well."

### **Unemployment**

In almost all countries they examined, youth unemployment was about twice as high as the general level of unemployment: a problem that was almost unknown before 1989. In 1998 average youth unemployment in the 18 transition countries for which data was available amounted to 30 percent. Many of the young unemployed, some 40 percent, had already been jobless for longer than one year. There are also great disparities in this area. Official youth unemployment in the Czech republic is 7 percent, whereas it is over 70 percent in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

As terrible as these official figures are, they are only part of the picture. Of 18 million young people in 1998 not in school or work, roughly 8 million were counted as unemployed, keeping 10 million young people off the unemployment statistics, although they had neither work nor were in education. Many of them were situated in the southern part of the region studied. There is also much evidence pointing to the fact that certain groups of young people are particularly affected by exclusion from the job market. Amongst these are those with a poor education, young women, those living in remote and rural areas, and members of ethnic and national minorities.

The study also found out that, as in the Western industrial nations, economic growth does not automatically lead to more jobs. In Poland, Hungary and Slovenia, economic growth since 1995 led to a higher rate of employment for young people. But in the Baltic states, the Czech republic and Slovakia the opposite was the case, where, despite economic growth, there was a decrease in the number of young people employed. Between 1995 and 1998, Russia saw around a 7 percent drop in the gross national

product, with a corresponding decrease of 4 per cent in employment over the same period, while for young people the level fell by 23 percent.

In view of these figures, it is no wonder that it is hardly possible for many young people in Eastern Europe and the CIS to lead an independent life or to start their own family. The report notes that the proportion of young adults aged 20 to 24 who still live with their parents had risen to almost two thirds.

The birth rate sank by a third or more between 1989 and 1998 in most of the region, and in Armenia and Lithuania by around half. If this trend were to continue, the number of young people aged between 15 and 24 in Eastern Europe would fall by around a third over the next 20 years.

A further section of the report deals with the increase in crime among children and young people, which partly expresses the conditions under which they must fight to survive. It points to the way some countries treat juvenile offenders like serious criminals. For example, boys in Kyrgyzstan who carry out minor thefts are locked up, often in solitary confinement, for six months. Under these barbaric prison conditions there is no access to education and there is no right for family visits. In Albania, young people can be locked up for over eight months even before coming to trial. The lack of facilities for holding juvenile offenders means they are locked up with adults.

A 1995 report on conditions in the Ukraine brought to light that one in two young people being detained at institutions controlled by the Interior Ministry reported they had been subject to unwanted sexual contact, and 30 percent of those questioned said they had been raped. Investigations by Unicef of the five central Asian states found that young people were kept in solitary confinement in all the countries examined—with the exception of Kazakhstan—and hardly received any visits from their families. Other countries, such as Georgia, lack basic legal protections: a youth affairs commission can commit repeat juvenile offenders to closed institutes for up to three years without any court proceedings. Throughout the region there is a general lack of proper juvenile institutions and appropriately trained personnel.

The authors highlight the deplorable state of affairs and call for greater public attention and expenditure, in order to invest in the future of young people. They also call on the young people themselves to play a greater role in shaping their own future. None of which is wrong. It is, however, illusory to expect these changes from the very political parties and forces that are responsible for the present conditions, and which have enabled them to enrich themselves enormously.

Interestingly, the authors report that the majority of the young people they questioned did not have any confidence in the so-called "new democratic institutions" (itself a more than flattering description). A 1998 inquiry in Lithuania found that 89 percent of those aged between 18 and 25 believed that the country's political parties did not have any significance for them. A similar inquiry in Russia found that two thirds of young people between 18 and 29 had a strongly negative attitude to the state institutions.

This should not, however, be equated with a rejection of democratic rights. The inquiry in Lithuania also found out that 85 percent of the young people questioned were interested in the political life of their country. The Russian inquiry found out that two-thirds of young people questioned regarded it as "inadmissible" to suspend presidential elections or to ban meetings or demonstrations.



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