

Dramatic increase in HIV infections in Eastern Europe

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The rapid spread of HIV in Eastern Europe underscores the true scale of social devastation following the reintroduction of capitalism into the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

An HIV epidemic is spreading rapidly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, particularly among children and adolescents. Unicef warned of these developments in a report published in mid-July. Nowhere else in the world is the rate of HIV infection climbing so rapidly as in this region.

The UN puts the number of those with HIV-infection in Eastern Europe at 1.5 million; in 2001, the figure was 900,000. In some areas of Russia, the number of infections increased by 700 percent from 2006 to today. Over 90 percent of all infected people in this region can be found in Russia and Ukraine.

Those particularly affected are children and young people; and especially those who are living in abject poverty—children in care, drug addicts, street kids or underage prostitutes. Overall, one third of new infections in the entire region are accounted for by youths and young adults, with 80 percent of those infected being younger than 30.

About 1.3 million children in the region are growing up in institutions where appalling conditions are the norm, and most soon end up on the streets.

A recent study in St. Petersburg found that among 300 street kids, 40 percent were HIV-positive. Similarly high rates were found in Odessa and Donetsk in Ukraine. A survey conducted by Unicef in Ukraine of 800 children and adolescents who spent half the day on the streets, showed that 57 percent of girls engaged at least occasionally in prostitution.

Another sign of social decline is the increasing drug use. The most common HIV transmission vector is contaminated needles, with many street kids already

using hard drugs from the age of 12.

The focus of the report and its criticism was the taboo with which HIV and Aids are regarded. This is true of course. For example, in 2008, Turkmenistan officially reported only two cases of HIV infection—even though the epidemic had engulfed the country long ago.

But the real reason for the enormous spread of HIV/Aids lies in the changing social and political conditions in these countries. The spread of the virus is directly related to the destruction of the health system and social infrastructure carried out at the beginning of the 1990s in the name of the free market.

"The spread of HIV started in the mid-90s in the Ukraine and Belarus", according to Reinhard Kurth, who heads the Berlin Robert Koch Institute. It then quickly expanded to the north and east. In the meantime, central Asia and the Caucasus are particularly affected by the pandemic.

An employee of the Austrian foreign ministry, who acts as a regional doctor in Moscow, points to a direct correlation between the spread of the virus and the social crisis in the East. In a statement, Dr. Wolfgang Luster writes, "Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were low endemic regions for HIV. It seemed as if the global HIV/AIDS epidemic had spared this geographical region".

Since then, the situation had changed radically. Luster writes, "With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a profound transformation took place in the structures in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Despite the heterogeneity of the regions, many similarities can be observed in all the countries concerned.

"Many countries have seen dramatic changes in their public health systems. Frequently, the level of staffing is insufficient or staff are not paid. Investment and

preventative measures are often inadequate or do not take place. Privatisation of the public health system has often led to two-tier health care, where part of the population are no longer adequately covered".

Hundreds of hospitals and other health facilities have been closed since the political changes of 1989-90, or have fallen into disrepair for lack of state funding. This process now continues apace as a result of the global economic crisis. In Latvia, for example, by the end of this year, there will be just over one-third of the number of hospitals compared to 2009.

Throughout Eastern Europe, this social decline has now led to life expectancy shortening by seven years on average compared with 1989.

Health programmes and much needed awareness campaigns do not exist or fall victim to the cutbacks. The report concludes that "the health systems in the 27 countries of the region have largely failed in the fight against HIV", and calls for a change in health and social policy in the fight against AIDS within the region.

But appeals to those in government fall on deaf ears. The governments of the region, which are often completely undemocratic and authoritarian regimes, are carrying through the destruction of previous social gains in consultation and collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU in order to "attract investors".

Knowing full well that the pandemic can only be stopped by the global access to medicines, improved health care and education, Western governments are cutting back on their spending for the fight against HIV/AIDS abroad.

While the costs for treatment rise, the funds that are made available are being decreased. According to the UN, funds made available by the G-8 nations for the study of HIV in 2009 amounted to \$7.6 billion, less than the \$7.7 billion spent in 2008. Austria, for example, has completely cut its contribution to programmes combating HIV/AIDS abroad, on the grounds that government spending is too high.



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