

Hundreds die from the cold in eastern Europe

Markus Salzmann
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The wave of cold weather that has swept over large parts of Europe has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people in eastern Europe within the space of a few days. According to the Ukraine Emergency Ministry's web site, the number of deaths had risen to 63 over the past six days in Ukraine, with 945 people hospitalised with frostbite. The extreme weather has claimed 35 lives in Poland since January 24, and 22 people have died in Romania, many of them homeless, according to Realitatea TV.

The real death toll is likely to be much higher. Initial statistics concentrate on urban areas and neglect the large proportion of the population, often elderly and poor, living in the countryside. In addition, some eastern European countries do not collect statistics for such deaths.

The Emergency Ministry in Ukraine announced that more than 30 people had frozen to death on the streets, 8 had died in hospitals and 7 in their homes. The hospitals in the country are hopelessly overcrowded, with many patients remaining for longer periods in clinics for their treatment.

The situation is similar in other eastern European countries. Russia has more than 100,000 homeless, whose lives are now threatened by the cold. Parts of the Black Sea have frozen near the Romanian coast, and ice has blocked the passage of ships in the port of Tomis. Six people died of hypothermia within 24 hours, according to the Ministry of Health. Although it has not snowed for days, many roads are closed due to snowdrifts.

The hardest-hit regions of Romania are in the east and south of the country. In Covasna County, temperatures fell to minus 31 degrees (Celsius), while the capital city

Bucharest registered minus 22 degrees.

In Bulgaria, 16 cities reported the coldest temperatures for over 100 years. Bulgaria, officially the poorest country in Europe, proclaimed its second-highest alert level as temperatures across the country plummeted to minus 29 degrees. An additional problem is a flu epidemic that has resulted in a number of deaths, mainly of elderly people. More than 450 schools in the country closed due to the cold, and eight deaths were recorded last weekend as a result of the cold snap.

The Baltic states are also badly affected. In the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, at least two people froze to death. In the early hours of Tuesday, in southeast Estonia, temperatures fell to minus 27.5 degrees, and in Latvia and Lithuania, governments called on parents to keep their children at home. Temperatures will fall further in the coming days to reach minus 30 degrees in many regions.

According to the civil defence organisation in Bosnia, 200 to 300 mainly elderly people are cut off from the outside world in the north of the country. Some of the villages in the region have had no electricity for several days.

In Serbia, the authorities reported two people frozen to death with another two missing. One participant of the rescue mission in Serbia told the media, "The situation is dramatic in some areas, with the snow five feet high."

In Poland, water has frozen pipes, leaving about 7,000 people without water in the Upper Silesian region of Kluczbork. The water was also cut off to a number of households in the capital city of Warsaw.

In the Czech Republic, the weather service issued a severe weather warning due to extreme temperatures. The first casualties have been announced in the country.

Chaotic conditions also prevail in Turkey. Hundreds of villages are completely cut off from the outside world due to the weather conditions. In particular, numerous roads in eastern Anatolia are completely impassable due to the unusual snowfall.

In northern Greece, temperatures dropped to minus 12 degrees, an unusual level for the country. Many ferries were cancelled due to storms in the Aegean. Freezing temperatures prevailed in Athens, where 20,000 people are homeless in the wake of the country's severe economic crisis.

All across the region, it is the homeless who are hardest hit by the freezing temperatures. Their numbers have risen sharply in eastern Europe in recent years. At the same time, funds for emergency shelters and medical help for the homeless have been casualties of the austerity measures introduced by governments following the financial crisis of 2008.

Romanian welfare spokesmen have publicly complained that the government is directly responsible for many deaths due to the cold. The brutal austerity programme of the right-wing government led by Emil Boc has drastically reduced aid to state and church organisations, or cut off funding altogether.

The existing emergency shelters are hopelessly overcrowded and unable to cope with the numbers seeking help. According to official figures—which are inadequate for obtaining a real picture of conditions—around 6,000 homeless live in the capital Bucharest. The total for the whole country is reckoned at approximately 15,000. In Bucharest, there are places for only about 300 people in homeless shelters, and the situation in the rest of the country is no better.

In addition, energy prices are rising in all affected countries while wages and public spending are being cut. Many families cannot afford to pay their heating

bills. An estimated 15 percent of households in Bulgaria and Romania have no, or only irregular, access to electricity and gas.

In Poland, two people died from carbon monoxide poisoning triggered by a faulty heater. According to media reports, nearly 30 people have been treated for such symptoms since the onset of cold weather.

The medical care for victims of the cold is also deplorable. In many countries, medical treatment is only available by paying cash. Vaccines are in short supply in Bulgaria, where the cold weather is accompanied by a flu pathogen. In the Baltic states, the health system has broken down almost completely. In Latvia, 40 percent of hospitals in the country have been closed in the last four years.



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