

# Death toll rises to 600 in European cold snap

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14 February 2012

The spate of cold weather that has lasted for weeks in many parts of Europe has now claimed at least 600 lives. Eastern Europe is the worst affected. The main reason for the high number of deaths is not the extreme cold temperatures per se, but rather the drastic austerity measures implemented in recent years and the widespread destruction of social infrastructure.

In the Ukraine, more than 150 deaths have been registered. Sixty-eight people have reportedly died in Poland from the cold, 64 in Russia and an estimated 70 in Belarus. In Romania, the official death toll has risen to 68. In Lithuania, 23 deaths have been reported, 24 in the Czech Republic and 10 in Latvia. At least 16 people have died so far due to the cold in Bulgaria, 13 in Hungary, and a total of 50 in the successor states of Yugoslavia.

Italy has also been severely affected by the cold, with 40 registered victims. In Abruzzo and Emilia Romagna, the army was mobilized to supply food to residents snowed under in mountain communities. Even in Rome, traffic came to a halt for a few days due to heavy snow, and gas supplies were disrupted.

Turkey has also been affected by snow, storms and floods. Dozens of flights were cancelled due to bad weather at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport and ferry services from Istanbul across the Marmara Sea were halted. In Edirne, on the Bulgarian border, several rivers burst their banks after a dam collapsed on the Bulgarian side of the border. The main border crossing between Turkey and Bulgaria was closed due to flooding.

The current weather conditions are extreme—in Serbia, the temperature has dropped on occasion to minus 36 degrees and many regions of Bulgaria have recorded the lowest temperatures for a hundred years. But the bad weather has led to fatalities following years of neglect of the technical and social infrastructure, combined with the impoverishment of broad layers of society. Electricity and gas supplies

have broken down in many places, and where they are still intact many cannot afford to pay for the high cost of energy.

In Serbia, electricity is in short supply. At current consumption rates a normal supply of electricity can be secured for only a few days, the Department of Energy warned in Belgrade. The closure of schools due to the cold is to be extended by a further week. On television, the authorities called upon the population to conserve power.

Caritas worker Sigried Spindlbeck reported on the situation in Belarus to the Austrian newspaper *Kleine Zeitung*. Temperatures have dropped as low as minus 35 degrees. Every day some 40 people are admitted to hospitals with frostbite. A number of villages are partially cut off from the outside world.

The cold has especially hit the homeless, elderly single people and families with many children. In some cases only one room is heated in kindergartens and schools. "Some homeless people are unable to make it to the soup kitchens of the charity because they have no shoes," Spindlbeck reported.

In Bulgaria, the movement of ships on the Danube has come to a standstill. Snow and ice hamper the country's traffic. A state of emergency has been called in the southern regions of the country after days of heavy rain and snowstorms led to floods.

In the small town of Svilengrad, in the southeast, flooding left water up to 1.20 meters deep. Ninety people had to be brought to safety and at least eight people drowned last week in the southern Bulgarian region of Haskovo.

The consequences of the radical austerity measures introduced by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov are particularly evident in the EU member state Bulgaria. The scale of the crisis due to cold weather, floods and a wave of influenza is a consequence of cuts in funding and personnel in the

country's public services.

In 2010, expenditure in the public sector was cut by 20 percent. In 2011, more than 4,000 jobs were eliminated. Over the past two years a number of public hospitals have been closed or their services pared back. Patients are often turned away due to understaffing and lack of equipment. Bribes for doctors and nurses are commonplace.

Bulgaria spends the least per capita on health care of any EU country. Only 8 percent of the gross domestic product is allocated to the health service. This chronic under-funding has led to an extreme shortage of doctors, with an increasing number quitting the country because of poor pay and harsh working conditions.

A large proportion of Bulgarian households are unable to pay for gas and electricity. According to a Eurostat study published in 2010, some 2.5 million people have difficulty paying for power, water and heat. Gas and electricity prices have risen dramatically in recent years, following the privatisation of public utilities.

A study published in January 2012 by the KNSB union concluded that only 12 percent of households have more than the bare minimum for existence. The study stated: "The rising cost of basic foodstuffs and fuel all over the world had an impact on the Bulgarian market. Last year there was a gradual increase in the prices of natural gas, electricity, heating and transport and services. This process was exacerbated by the lack of regulation, which has led to an uncontrolled situation in the pricing policies of merchants and middlemen for manufacturers and customers."

The situation is similar in Romania, which also joined the EU in 2007. The austerity measures and price increases introduced in the country in recent years have had major social repercussions. According to a study by the human rights organisation Samusocial, around 300 people die from cold in the capital Bucharest every year.

There are just 300 places in shelters for the estimated 5,000 homeless people in Bucharest. A study published in 2011 reported a sharp increase in people dependent on soup kitchens. In some regions, their number increased threefold.

The immediate cause for the protests in Romania that led to the resignation last week of Prime Minister Emil Boc was the attempt by the government to implement

further cuts to the country's health system. The government plans involved the complete privatisation of state health insurance and a reduction of the hospital network.

Of the more than 400 hospitals nationwide, only three meet European standards. Essential medicines are in short supply. In many hospitals, patients are expected to provide their own cutlery and cups and can expect to be inadequately supplied with food. Thousands of patients die each year from infections contracted during their hospital stay.



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