

## Lives at risk as HIV services for drug users collapse in eastern Ukraine.

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People who inject drugs will be cut off from life saving treatment after drug programmes are finally closed in areas of the country affected by the war in eastern Ukraine.

The Alliance for Public Health (APH) has announced that the last 64 patients in the occupied area of Donetsk who receive Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST), will be cut off from treatment within days.

It comes as civil society organisations gather in Vienna at the [Commission on Narcotic Drugs \(CND\)](#) ahead of the first UN General Assembly Session on drugs (UNGASS) for nearly 20 years.

Since the outbreak of war in 2014 APH has struggled to maintain harm reduction services to people who inject drugs, particularly in areas of the country annexed by Russia, such as Crimea and conflict areas in eastern Ukraine under the control of Russian-backed fighters.

Overall around 50,000 people receive HIV prevention services in occupied areas of Ukraine. But since the start of the conflict in 2014, more than 900 patients have lost access OST in the war zone area. The last remaining 64 patients still receiving treatment in Donetsk will run out of supplies (methadone) by the end of March.

When people have their methadone services cut their health rapidly deteriorates as they go into withdrawal. Many drug users, in desperation, will seek out replacement illicit drugs. HIV and overdose risks often rise dramatically as a result.

In the Donbas area that includes Donetsk, an extra 495 new cases of HIV were detected in 2015.

The Ukraine and Russian Federation have different approaches to 'harm reduction' policies, such as OST, which have been shown to help prevent HIV. Between 2008 and 2014 Ukraine managed to [reduce HIV prevalence among people who inject drugs by half whilst increasing access to harm reduction services such as OST](#). By contrast, OST is banned in the [Russian Federation](#) and the country consistently rejects evidence showing the importance of harm reduction techniques for preventing HIV rates which continue to rise in Russia.

Pavlo Skala, Associate Director at APH said: "The situation here is very desperate. For thousands of people in the Crimea and Donbas areas, treatment interruption has been a disaster, dozens have died because of the closure of OST programmes. We have heard horror stories from people who escaped."

Ruslan, from Luhansk fled the war zone in 2015. He started using drugs in 1995 and began an OST programme in 2009. His case is one of several collated in a report by APH '[People. Fates. Program...](#)' a series of case studies about people who inject drugs and have been affected by the war in Ukraine.

He said: "I stayed in Luhansk during the warfare because I had to help my elderly parents who were hiding in a cellar without water and power. But I was forced to leave because of the discontinuation of methadone and anti-retroviral therapy (ART)."

"When the situation was just building we understood what was going to happen, because the situation in the Crimea was an example for us. Those who were wiser started leaving at once, then our doses

decreased. Then the blockade was imposed and, while many left, I had to stay in the city to care for my ill mother. When the doses were cut to the lowest, I understood that it was time to leave.”

APH estimates that overall:

- 6,000 HIV positive patients and 33 000 clients of harm reduction services are at risk in the war zone in eastern Ukraine;
- 800 OST patients in Crimea and 900 patients in eastern Ukraine have been forced to end their OST treatment since the war began. Treatment bans, low drug stocks in non-Ukraine controlled areas and bureaucratic drug control measures by the Ukrainian government have affected the situation;
- Many humanitarian groups including some UN agencies have been forced to leave areas of Ukraine controlled by non-Ukraine government forces in eastern Ukraine;

Mr Skala said: “During the Vienna talks [CND 14-22 March] we expect that the last 64 patients in Donetsk will have services terminated. It will be the end of OST treatment in the war zone, which started in 2005.”

[The International HIV AIDS Alliance has called on UN members states to back harm reduction policies in the run up to the UN General Assembly Special Session on drugs.](#) The Alliance has called on states to endorse an outcome document that includes:

- A commitment to ending AIDS among people who use drugs;
- Acknowledgement of the importance of harm reduction interventions in combatting HIV and an explicit commitment to harm reduction within the UNGASS outcome document;
- Decriminalisation of drugs possessed for personal use, and drug paraphernalia;
- Genuine consultation and involvement of civil society organisations and people who use drugs in decision making about drug policy and HIV; and
- Mechanisms should be put in place to monitor the effectiveness of drug policies, in particular existing policies underpinning the war on drugs.

## ENDS

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## Notes to editors

- The 59th Session of the [Commission on Narcotic Drugs](#) takes place in Vienna from 14 to 22 March.
- [‘People. Fates. Program...’](#) A series of case studies about people who inject drugs in Ukraine compiled by the Alliance for Public Health is available [here](#).
- The International HIV AIDS Alliance has published a report [‘Ending the HIV and hepatitis C epidemics among people who inject drugs’](#) to help guide civil society organisations in their public advocacy work in the run up to the UNGASS.

- OST is a therapy for people addicted to heroin or other opiates offering them a safe way to take drugs, which does not involve injecting and reduces the risk of transmitting HIV and other diseases.