

AIDS in Ukraine

Photographs & Text by
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Ukraine has the highest concentration of HIV+ people anywhere in Europe. In 2005 it was declared the country experiencing the fastest acceleration of infection in the world, at that time it was mostly due to IV drug use. Now it's a 50/50 between sexual transmission and IV drug use with infected needles. Six years later some things are better, some remain the same and some are worse. This post-communist country has had many teething problems transforming into a fledgling capitalist democracy. One of the most difficult is the constant struggle for power within an ever-changing, ill-resolved government with a legacy of corruption. The consequences for those who are HIV+ have been dire.

Every change in government has involved a new tender war between the major pharmaceuticals as they struggle to outbid and out-bribe each other as they jostle for the attention of the new Ministry of Health. This has meant that for thousands, access to life-saving Anti-Retroviral therapy has stalled every time a new government has come into power.



A young man in the final stages of full blown AIDS lies in a coma days from death in hospital, August 31, 2011 in Kryvyi Rig, Ukraine. He has a very low T cell count and is almost certain to die from immune failure related disease.



A very sick man living with full blown AIDS holds up his young son while his wife looks on, August 31, 2011 in Kryvyi Rig, Ukraine. This man has a very low T cell count and is almost certain to die soon.

Back in 2005, the government had not yet fully embraced the idea of providing ART's to sick people. Nowadays that has changed and if you can afford it, you can get on a subsidized program for medication. However, if you are not already established on a list of registered recipients, and you find you are HIV+ and in need of ART's, you cannot get on the list until the new government has mapped out their relationship with the new pharmaceutical provider. In many cases, this can take at least a year, a year in which thousands of people will die simply because their names do not appear on that vital list.

There is a long history of people living with AIDS carrying a heavy stigma in Ukraine, with most Ukrainians seeing them as criminals.

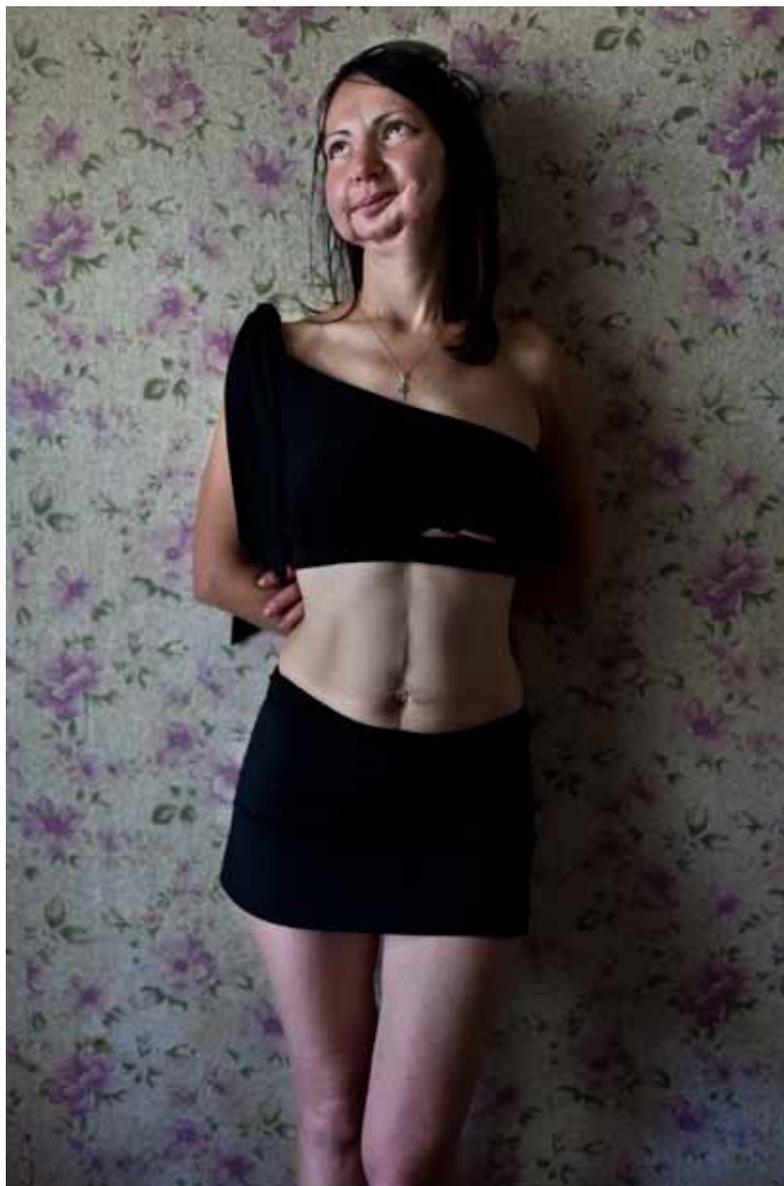
This is improving but lingers on in the attitudes that make not getting onto a list a death sentence. Mass unemployment and a genuine lack of opportunity also characterize much of Ukraine. This has infused fatalism in many of her people and a slide into alcoholism and IV drug use are often a simple escape from a hard life without alternatives. Prison and addiction are often a by-product for thousands and once inside that system there is little hope. Prisons in Ukraine have a reputation for no compassion for those living with HIV although there is some evidence that testing for HIV is becoming more commonplace in prisons across Ukraine. That said, multiple ex-prisoners who were interviewed said that prisoners who contracted full-blown AIDS were



A group of HIV+ people and their children who prefer to keep their status anonymous, September 4, 2011 in Odessa, Ukraine.

often released when death was imminent so responsibility would not fall on the authorities. Drug use remains heavy across Ukraine. Heroin is ever present but there is a new drug in Ukraine, originating in Russia, "Krokodil" is an ephedrine based drug, utilizing cough medicine and enhanced with eyedropper fluid. It has a tremendous effect on human flesh and bone, literally eroding bone and flesh away from addicts. It has a longer high and is cheap to produce and many addicts cook "Krokodil" at home. Of the many that I saw, some were partially paralysed, others had lost the lower part of their jaw. It is a truly frightening drug. Prostitution is an ever-present part of any drug landscape and Ukraine is no exception. This is reinforced by unemployment in a never-

ending spiral that will remain the case as long as unemployment and lack of opportunity remain the norm for most Ukrainians. HIV+ orphans are for the first time being accepted and being adopted. In 2005 there was little evidence they would ever leave the very few orphanages that would take them. Now there are a number of fantastic facilities and genuine care. There are also regular adoptions and a lesser stigma at the idea of adopting an HIV+ child. There is even a Russian Orthodox Church sponsored orphanage in the West of Ukraine that has the most impressive facility of all. They have adopted 44 HIV+ children who are looked after with exceptional care.



FAR LEFT: Svetlana is an addiction damaged 33 year old woman who is trying to remain drug free with the support of a group of like-minded friends, August 28, 2011 in Kharkov, Ukraine. She lost the lower part of her jaw to an infection caused by unclean chemicals in the drugs she was using and was also badly beaten by her previous boyfriend throughout her ten years of addiction.

TOP: Addicts cook up an Ephedrine based Amphetamine cocktail in a small apartment in a housing project, August 28, 2011 in Kharkov, Ukraine.

BOTTOM: An addict displays the bone-decaying effects of an Ephedrine based Amphetamine cocktail called "Krokodil" as he sits after shooting up in a small apartment in a housing project, August 28, 2011 in Kharkov, Ukraine. This man's jaw bone was so decayed by the use of this drug it had to be surgically removed.



In a small apartment in a poor neighbourhood of Poltava, one of two brothers shoot up drugs while their mother looks on helpless in her own home, August 12, 2005 in Poltava, Ukraine. Alla, left, is the mother of Dima, 39, middle, and Ruslan, 36, out of frame. They have been addicts for over 20 years and in that time both sons have had daughters. Alla lost her husband 15 years ago and had to quit her job as a kindergarten teacher to look after her addict sons. Ruslan, the younger son, often berates her for being a bad mother as a means of controlling her and ensuring that she will continue to look after him and his brother. It is rumoured in the neighbourhood that the family deals in drugs so as the two brothers can maintain their addiction.





Maria, a drug addict and sex worker, entertains a client in a room she rents in a house from an old lady, August 28, 2011 in Kryvyi Rig, Ukraine. Maria uses drugs on a daily basis and sees many men every week but remains HIV negative. She claims she need the money to support herself, her habit and her 9 year old daughter.



Maria, a drug addict and sex worker in a room she rents in a house from an old lady, August 28, 2011 in Kryvyi Rig, Ukraine. Maria uses drugs on a daily basis and sees many men every week but remains HIV negative. She claims she need the money to support herself, her habit and her 9 year old daughter.



A gynecological examination in the vehicle of local NGO "Faith, Hope, Love" which works with Sex-workers, September 4, 2011 in Odessa, Ukraine. The NGO has a vehicle with a gynecologist, two social workers and a driver which moves around the city 4 nights a week doing rapid testing for HIV, handing out condoms and referrals, counselling and also performing gynecological services for sex-workers.



FAR LEFT: A roadside sex worker who is an HIV+ drug addict works the main road leading in and out of Poltava, August 12, 2005 in Poltava, Ukraine. These girls see between one and five clients a night, for an average of \$8 a time. Many of these girls move from town to town across the country with truckers, spreading the HIV virus as they go.

LEFT: A roadside sex worker who is a drug addict services a client in shrub just off the main road leading in and out of Poltava, August 12, 2005 in Poltava, Ukraine. These girls see between one and five clients a night, for an average of \$8 a time. Many of these girls move from town to town across the country with truckers, spreading the HIV virus as they go.



FAR LEFT: A roadside sex worker who is an HIV+, & an IV drug addict shoots up in her home, August 26, 2011 in Poltava, Ukraine. These girls see between one and five clients a night, for an average of \$8 a time. Many of these girls move from town to town across the country with truckers, spreading the HIV virus as they go. Mass unemployment across Ukraine is a big driver for prostitution, drug use is often a natural follow on and reinforces the cycle of sex for sale.

LEFT: A roadside sex worker who is an HIV+, & an IV drug addict works the main road leading in and out of Poltava, August 26, 2011, Poltava, Ukraine. These girls see between one and five clients a night, for an average of \$8 a time. Many of these girls move from town to town across the country with truckers, spreading the HIV virus as they go

A prisoner in the last stages of full-blown AIDS who has been rushed to the Kiev AIDS Center from prison receives compassionate care from a doctor while chained to the bed, August 25, 2011 in Kiev, Ukraine. This facility is one of two in Ukraine and deals with many drug addicts and other difficult AIDS infected people. There are strict rules and conditions in the wards which staff claim are necessary to protect them from aggressive, manic patients.





FAR LEFT: Tatjana, 42, is a former drug addict who started taking drugs at age 32, August 16, 2005 in Donetsk, Ukraine. She became HIV+ in 1996 and quit. She has two children, a daughter of 23 and son of 16. She has been on anti retro virals for a year but they are having an adverse effect on her. She cannot walk properly, hear properly and feels the whole time that something inside her is pushing her, driving her, so she spend most of her time walking around her tiny apartment. She cannot talk properly and cries constantly. Tatjana's mother Olga, 72, takes care of her and her 16 year old son. This is something she does more out of a sense of duty than love and that weighs heavily on Tatjana and makes for a loveless atmosphere in the apartment. Tatjana's mother also stated, "They should shoot all drug users. I don't understand why the government should spend money on them." thus illustrating her lack of understanding of the far reaching implications of HIV for families and communities. This lack of understanding is commonplace in Ukraine and is the norm. HIV + people are often treated as criminals rather than victims.

TOP & BOTTOM: Inside the Poltava Tuberculosis clinic, a facility with insufficient resources which is the only facility for Tuberculosis patients in Poltava, August 26, 2011 in Poltava, Ukraine.

Addicts undergo sleep therapy during the drug detox program at Psycho Neurological Dispensary, August 31, 2011 in Kryvyi Rig, Ukraine. This program has good success in getting patients back to a physiological level where they can receive counselling for their addictions.





TOP LEFT: A woman waits for the result of a rapid test for the HIV virus in a clinic, August 30, 2011 in a poor part of Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine.

TOP RIGHT: A former Surgical doctor, Olga, conducts mobile rapid testing for the AIDS virus in housing projects amongst drug users, August 30, 2011 in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine. Olga came to work in these communities because she was unknowingly infected with HIV by a surgical patient in late 2000 when she was 26. Her hospital found out at the regular 6 month testing required by surgical doctors. Olga was then asked to resign by the Chief Medical officer and when she refused was subjected to humiliating and multiple pressures at work. She was finally forced to resign after 4 months of unrelenting pressure and active rumor mongering amongst hospital staff that she had been working as a prostitute and violating her privacy by telling other about her HIV status. She spent the next two years locked away in her apartment, not daring to tell anyone and being a total recluse. Since then she has embraced her HIV + status and uses her medical training to care for disadvantaged HIV+ people in her town.

BOTTOM LEFT: A former Surgical doctor, Olga, conducts mobile rapid testing for the AIDS virus in housing projects amongst drug users, August 30, 2011 in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A young, pregnant street-girl Carla hold out her AIDS test which came in negative after a test in a mobile testing center, August 25, 2011 on the streets of Kiev, Ukraine.

Sergei helps his partially paralysed friend Volver to shower at a rehabilitation center, August 29, 2011 in Kharkov, Ukraine. Volver was paralysed when he used a drug made up of Ephedrine and other chemicals which permanently damaged his nervous system. Sergei and other members of this recovering addict community help Volver to get through each day with acts of kindness that bind them together like brothers. This unselfish daily activity gives lie to the fact that addicts and also HIV+ people in Ukraine are often seen as unworthy people undeserving of compassion.





Ukraines' only Condom manufacturing plant, August 30, 2011 in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine.



Ukraines' only Condom manufacturing plant on August 30, 2011 in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine.



HIV + drug addict Sacha bathes his mother every day in their small apartment August 31, 2011 in Kryvyi Rig, Ukraine. He takes care of her, washing her clothes, feeding her and makes sure she is cared for. Sacha is worried as he moves into full blown AIDS that there will be no-one to look after his elderly mother. The reason his case is so worrisome is because there have been no new admissions allowed to the list of Anti Retro-Viral therapy recipients for those people living with full blown AIDS in Ukraine since the end of 2010. Sacha is not on that list and is ineligible for treatment as a result. Nine months later in September 2011 all those people who have become critically ill but are not on the old list of ART recipients are living under a death sentence as their immune systems collapse. There is a new Government in Ukraine and the Ministry of Health controls all ART (Anti-RetroViral treatment,) medicine. As this business is put out to tender to the various pharmaceutical companies, a series of ignorances, bribes and corrupt practises hinder this vital service from coming into being in time to provide life-saving ART therapy to those who are dying without it.

Alina, a 10 year old HIV+ girl is examined by doctors at a mobile unit which moves between small cities dealing with HIV+ children who would not otherwise have access to treatment, September 1, 2011 in Donetsk, Ukraine. Alina is the daughter of HIV+ drug addicts, her T cell count is checked as is her weight and growth, she also receives 3 months ART therapy medication from the doctors of this mobile unit. Alina is extraordinarily independent, she spends most of her time with her great grandmother and essentially raises herself, she consults with the doctors on how her body is coping with the disease and she understands what is happening to her completely. She cooks, cleans and plans for herself and does well at school and is very independent and well mannered, especially for someone who comes from her social circumstances. A person to be hugely admired and loved.





TOP: The only orphanage in Ukraine dedicated exclusively to children living with HIV, September 2, 2011 in Donetsk, Ukraine. The children here are given special care and access to ART therapy which ensures they live fuller, happier lives. Prejudice against adopting HIV + kids in Ukraine is slowly waining and more kids are slowly being accepted and adopted by foster parents. This is a big leap forwards in the last 6 years when HIV+ kids grew old and lonely without hope of adoption, often living in isolation in orphanages.

BOTTOM LEFT: In addition to normally orphaned children, Orphanage Zeleniy Gai in Kharkov, Ukraine is a home to HIV + children, Aids affected children as well as children removed from homes where parents were either too addicted to care for them or too remiss as a result of their addictions, on August 28 2011 in Kharkov, Ukraine. This orphanage is one of the few in Ukraine to make children living with HIV a priority. There are special excercise programs, therapy using animals and special new born units all designed to care for these children.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Banchensky Svyato - Voznesensky Monastery Orphanage is an orphanage founded by the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine which takes exceptional care of 253 kids, September 6, 2011 in Chernivtsi, Ukraine. 44 of the kids at the orphanage are HIV+ and live in a special building with permanent care-givers and exceptional living conditions. The kids on ART therapy receive that daily at breakfast, the kids old enough to go to school does so at the local village school. The younger kids receive a kindergarten style education on the orphanage premises. This orphanage has been taking HIV+kids in since 2002, in marked contrast to the negative attitudes displayed by the church towards HIV+ people in Ukraine.

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An HIV+ man and his HIV negative wife and her adopted daughter in their home on September 1, 2011 in Donetsk, Ukraine. He met her when he came for treatment for his Tuberculosis at a clinic where she worked as a doctor and they have been together ever since.

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