

NO MORE METHADONE IN THE CRIMEA

The Crimean Peninsula, internationally recognised as part of the Ukraine, was annexed by the Russian Federation in March 2014. Russia absorbed the peninsula after staging a military intervention.

Russia's action has caused much controversy internationally. The Ukraine are calling it an "occupation" and a "gross violation of international law". Most of the world agrees, including the European Union. Within the Crimea there is some pro-Russian support. However, many are negatively affected and devastated by the action. But to call for "secession" from Russia is now a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or a prison term of up to three years. If made on the internet or other public media, the amount increases and the term expands to five years.

People who use drugs have been particularly affected, with 14,000 cut off from critical HIV prevention services. There were 806 people abruptly cut off pharmacotherapy without reduction or analgesia for withdrawals.

Igor, a peer activist who lives in the Crimea, was given his last dose of methadone on 5 May 2014. Igor told User's News that the banning of Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST) in the Crimea has been inhumanely administered. "It is awful. There are no pills for pain reduction here. There are no places in the narcologic hospital. There is no future, no trust, no life for the most patients."

Russia's draconian drug policies mean that OST is prohibited in Russia. It experiences one of the highest rates of new HIV infections in the world. An estimated 1.2 million people in Russia are living with HIV. Injecting drug users represent nearly 80% of all HIV cases in Russia, the result of a policy that bans NSPs and pharmacotherapy.

In the Crimea, nine years implementation of OST had just begun to see rates of HIV decrease. The number of registered HIV cases among people who inject drugs dropped from 7,127 in 2006 to 5,847 in 2013 thanks to an effective harm reduction approach. In addition, under a harm reduction approach, the Crimea's 196,000 people who

inject drugs had access to HIV prevention services such as needle and syringe programs, condoms and rapid testing and counselling for HIV and sexually transmitted infections. This has all been halted. Igor also reports that the Ukrainian State Program for hepatitis C treatment has been stopped in the Crimea.

Igor reported "Life here is very difficult at the moment. Everything is very expensive, the shelves of shops are almost empty and there is a big problem with banks and ATMs. Also some of the promised changes have not come to pass, for example the pensions have not increased, despite a promise they would grow by four. The Crimea is a tourist region and many Crimeans get their income from tourism. However, there are no tourists anywhere. I am not political, this is just what I can see for myself."

UN asked Igor how he is coping without his methadone. He replied: "Thank God I can get my pills in the Ukraine - I can get a prescription and then get the pills. But if I stayed in the Crimea I would not be able to get anything. People who has stayed here are now forced to use street drugs but there's a big problem to find them and there are a lot of Russian cops here. A lot of people who use drugs have already been arrested. Unfortunately we now have 'krokodil' here in the Crimea. Earlier, this problem has not been here. We can tell that 'krokodil' is due to the OST banning here."

Igor told UN: "The only opportunity is escape from here". He explained "There's a project by the Soros Foundation - Renaissance Ukraine and Alliance Ukraine. Through this project ANY patient of the Crimean OST program could get OST and money to live for a few months in one of two Ukrainian cities: Kiev and Dnepropetrovsk. But the problem is almost no-one wants to leave the Crimea. Only about 50 people out of the 806 Crimean patients have left the Crimea and moved in Kiev or Dnepropetrovsk."

Risking imprisonment, Igor has made a film to let the world know about the OST issue in the Crimea and posted it on Youtube. He focuses on a woman from the OST program and simply lets her tell

“IS IT A CRIME -- THE DESIRE TO LIVE WITH DIGNITY?”

her story about the impact of the banning on her life. Let's call her Sofia This is what she has to say:

“During May 2014, OST programs in the Crimea were discontinued. As a result of this, 800 people were left face-to-face with their problems. On May 12, 2014 buprenorphine was for the last time dispensed at the opiate substitution treatment site in Simferopol. Twelve days ago my life halted. For five years I have been putting together the shatters of my life, maintaining my health... Everything is over, I do not want to live.

In addition to taking OST, I am registered with the AIDS centre, receive ART and anti-TB therapy, I have liver cirrhosis, I had hepatitis A and B, I'm infected with hepatitis C. I felt more or less stable and well, but now just every part of my body aches. All my chronic diseases have exacerbated.

I do not equate us, drug users, to oncology patients, but I think even they are in a somehow better position: we have multiple terminal stage diseases. I have to go to work. I have to support my three children. I'm overcoming terrible pains every day! Many of the Crimean patients have multiple diagnoses, some of these are lethal. There is no real alternative to OST for such patients.

After OST closure in the Crimea we have been given medication only twice. They prescribed us Tramadol, 20 capsules, twice, then told that there are no more drugs available, what was left was taken to an in-patient clinic for other patients.

A Russian Minister of Health came to speak to us and promised that they would help us with treatment and medications to mitigate the discontinuation of our OST. They promised to help us with rehabilitation so we could get our lives settled. But we did not receive anything of this. There were two psychologists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg. They persuaded us to flee from here. But where to flee?

Neither me, nor the people I know received any drugs to help us detoxify. We are suffering. We are dying. We are sinking back in the same abyss.

Unfortunately, already many former OST patients in the Crimea have returned to using street drugs. This will surely affect the criminal situation in the Crimea and cause an increase in dangerous viruses on the peninsula. There are many associated diseases. I suppose half of the patients will die. It is very difficult to survive using here. Maybe some people will continue to inject, if they can afford it. It's very difficult to handle all that.

But as for me, without OST it will all be over. My life, which I strived so hard to pull together, will be gone again. I did not think life could be so cruel! It's so painful! It's spring now, everything is in blossom, but my world lost all its colours. I do not want even to breathe, let alone to work.

I think the patients on the program, those who have lots of deadly diagnoses: hepatitis, cirrhosis, and fourth stage of HIV... they need help. Maybe they should just collect and dispose of all of us, so that we would not suffer anymore and our friends and relatives would not suffer. Our parents, our children suffer with us...

There is no more OST in the Crimea. Stable patients of a state program were turned to potential criminals just in a single day. They just wanted to live an ordinary life, to have a family and a job.

Is it a crime -- the desire to live with dignity?”

