

The Security Implications of HIV/AIDS in Russia

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The growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia is a national security issue. Russia's rate of infection is the most rapid in the world, and its government is doing little to address the issue. In certain cases, it is actively thwarting international efforts at assistance. If Russia follows the trend lines of other states, such as South Africa, with most new cases occurring in males 18-25, HIV/AIDS will have disastrous effects on higher education, military service, and the labor market. If the Russian government continues to stall in its response to the epidemic, and if the rates of infection increase, HIV/AIDS could possibly threaten the stability of the state, or force the state to enact draconian measures to contain the disease.

Although concern among the Russian population about the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS is significant, the Russian government continues to treat the problem as a low priority. The independent Russian Public Opinion and Market Research (ROMIR) survey foundation in December 2001 reported that more than 90 percent of Russians see combating AIDS as highly relevant in Russia. Despite HIV rates doubling in Russia every year since 1998, government funding has simply not kept pace.

The West can and should play a role in assisting Russia in its efforts to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS. With the Russian government doing so little to address this issue and with the Russian public concerned about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia, Western governments and international organizations can play a greater role to try to stabilize the situation before it deteriorates even further. National security implications are clear, not just for Russia, but for the West as well, and the West is recognizing this. For example, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee will soon (February 13, 2002) launch a higher profile examination of HIV/AIDS, focusing on the disease in Russia as well as China and India. This realization, however, is coming only slowly in Russia. Western officials and nongovernmental specialists need to convey to the Russian government that it must respond better to HIV/AIDS in Russia, and the Russian government needs to show the international community that it is serious about tackling this epidemic. A good immediate first step in this direction would be for the Russian government to

enter negotiations with the World Bank for its proposed \$150 million loan for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, rather than to continue to block it.

Basic Facts

HIV infection rates in Russia have quintupled since 1997. Many experts believe that 1 percent of the adult Russian population is infected. If true, that would mean nearly 1.4 million people.

Other statistics give an alarming portrait of HIV/AIDS in Russia:

- The number of new cases in Moscow and St Petersburg increased last year by 10 and 12 times (respectively).
- HIV/AIDS was first reported in the Soviet Union in 1987, with 15 cases. By 1995, 1,072 cases had been reported in Russia. The rate of infection began to rise rapidly in 1996: 1,546 newly registered cases in 1996; 4,399 in 1997; 18,218 in 1999; 75,000 between January and October 2001. By the end of 2001, Russia had 163,000 total reported cases of HIV.
- Researchers believe that the real number of cases is 5 to 10 times higher than is reported. If this rate continues, 5 million infections are expected by 2005 (Russian population in 2001 was approximately 146 million). Estimates for deaths in Russia in 2015 at this rate are 5 to 10 million, the majority of which will be males 15 to 29.
- 3 out of 4 infected in Russia are male. In new cases, this ratio has narrowed to 2:1 males to females. HIV infection is reported in all 89 Russian regions, with 90 percent in just 20, and 50 percent in just 4 (Moscow, Moscow region, Kaliningrad, and Krasnodar). Kaliningrad has the highest prevalence rate, with 254.4 per 100,000.
- The growth rate means that Russia, along with Africa, India, and China, is one of the world's AIDS crisis regions.

Pathways of Infection in Russia

AIDS came to Russia through homosexual transmission. By 1999, however, 90 percent of new infections were due to intravenous drug use, via sharing of needles. The trend is set to change again, experts expect, with heterosexual transmission becoming the primary form of transmission, and an increase of infection to children via pregnant HIV-infected women. This is likely to mean a further increase in the rate of infection in Russia, as HIV bursts from the relatively restricted intravenous drug user population to the general population. In particular, Russian women who are both intravenous drug users and prostitutes are a gateway for infection to the general population; 15 percent of the approximately 50,000 prostitutes in Moscow are estimated to be HIV positive.

The pattern of infection in Russia in the 1990s was very different from that in the United States (homosexual contact) and Africa (heterosexual contact and mother-to-child). Given that the pattern in Russia appears to be changing to the characteristic in Africa, the rates of infection and effects on the population are likely to grow to crisis proportions as bad or worse than those in Africa.

Relation to other health issues

HIV/AIDS is closely related to the explosion of tuberculosis in Russia. Those with HIV are at greater risk for contracting TB because of their depressed immune systems. The Red Cross estimates that Russia has 340,000 cases of TB, with 130,000 new cases each year. 30,000 people die from TB each year in Russia. In addition to an increase in overall rates, the proportion of multidrug resistant TB is increasing.

Russia's prison system presents a challenge to stifling the spread of both HIV/AIDS and TB. Both HIV and TB are prevalent in Russia's prison system because of the poor health and living conditions, and Russia has the highest prison population per person in the world. HIV infections are 26 times higher in the prison population than in the general population; TB infections are 30 times higher. Also alarming, as prisoners are released, they introduce HIV and TB into the general population; in 1999, more than 31,000 prisoners with TB were released.

Needed Treatment

The Soviet health system, already poor by western standards, collapsed with the contraction of the Russian economy in the 1990s. Facilities are poor and equipment scarce, and hospitals and clinics are known to reuse needles. Russia must overhaul its health care system and earmark substantial funds to ensure both prevention of the spread of HIV through contaminated instruments and treatment of those who already suffer from the disease.

With a course of antiretroviral drugs, good diet, and health care, a person with HIV can expect to live 20–30 years. Russia's economy, as well as its poor health system, make this nearly impossible. Russia's HIV/AIDS and TB crises will likely further cripple the country's economic prospects, especially because the diseases are concentrated in the young male population.

Russian and International Responses

If these projections are even remotely correct, HIV/AIDS will devastate Russia's transition. The international community, as well as the Russian government, must focus on the topic now. The Russian response, as outlined below, has thus far been inadequate to counter the devastating effects that HIV/AIDS could have on Russia's social and economic systems. A massive prevention effort could affect the trajectory of HIV/AIDS. Russia must work with international entities and organizations to address the problem rather than eschew aid efforts.

The Russian government's response to this crisis is simply not enough to have a meaningful impact. The World Health Organization recommends that a country spend about 5 percent of its GDP on health care. Russia spends about 2.2 percent (the United States spends 14 percent). The United States spends \$10,000–\$15,000 per patient per year for HIV/AIDS treatment. The minimum necessary is estimated at \$1,000–\$5,000 for drug therapy. Russia spent \$4 million in 2000 with 90,000 cases, or \$45 per reported HIV case. The Russian government expects to spend \$5 million per year for treatment and prevention, while experts estimate it will need to spend \$10 billion per year on treatment alone in the coming years.

In April 2001, the World Bank offered to open negotiations with the Russian government for a \$150 million project for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. The Russian government has refused this project. As in all World Bank projects, the pharmaceuticals that would be provided would have to meet international standards. The bank offered to help make Russian

companies certifiable according to such standards. The Russian minister of health wants only Russian drug companies to be used, and has refused help in getting certification. The Russian government is also refusing to enter the international procurement procedures of open bidding. The minister of justice is currently trying to enter into separate negotiations with the World Bank because this project would have been aimed in part at the prison population.

On January 30, 2002, President Vladimir Putin said in a speech that the nation's health crisis had seriously eroded its economic and demographic balance, and noted that the country spends 3 percent of salary funds on sick pay. He called for improving the country's sports programs as part of an effort to address the health crisis, but made no mention of HIV and TB.

The Way Forward

The Russian government must embark on a comprehensive prevention campaign that includes sex education in schools and a massive media campaign targeted especially to Russian youths. Prevention efforts now will prove to be immensely cheaper than treatment for potentially millions of HIV-infected people later. Furthermore, strict regulations imposed by the Russian government for treatment efforts currently hinder the efficacy of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to help combat the disease. Looser restrictions will allow NGOs to provide more services, including direct care that the government cannot afford to provide. Important and concrete steps must be taken, and they must be taken without delay, including:

- The Russian government must be urged at all levels to address this pandemic immediately and systematically.
- U.S. and European policymakers must come to understand Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic as a security issue and place it on policy agendas. This issue must become a high-priority, high-visibility effort.
- International assistance must be forthcoming for HIV, intravenous drug use, and tuberculosis.
- In Russia, the federal government must work with local and regional authorities to respond to the crisis.
- A public education campaign must begin immediately.
- The Russian government and Russian society must change their counterproductive approaches to HIV, health care, and disease prevention.
- Infection rates among uniformed services generally are much higher than civilians. Given the decline in professionalism in the Russian military, we can expect this situation to be particularly acute. Programs with uniformed services must be developed to take this issue into account.

Effects on Russia

The potential effects of HIV and AIDS on Russia could prove devastating if not addressed immediately. Not only will Russia face a health care crisis immensely larger than it does now, it will also suffer from cataclysmic economic and social crises. Clearly, this problem threatens the future of Russia's national security.

- Increased mortality as HIV becomes AIDS and AIDS proves fatal will increase Russia's orphan population, which itself is susceptible to the types of behavior that fuel HIV/AIDS (and other diseases), such as drug use.
- Because HIV infection is most prevalent in Russia's younger population, infection and mortality will cripple Russia's future economic potential, in a country where the population is already expected to shrink 20–30 percent during the next few decades.
- Particular attention should be directed to the uniformed services. They are consistently ranked among the highest affected groups by HIV/AIDS. In Africa, the infection rate of military ranges from 10–50 percent.

According to the United Nations, HIV is spreading faster in the former Soviet bloc than anywhere else in the world. Russian officials seem unwilling to confront the problem, or unwilling to acknowledge that the problem exists. Rampant HIV infection is one of the devastating legacies of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The epidemic will lower that Russia's average life expectancy and drain its economy, and entails real security implications. International assistance has worked to lower transmission rates in other countries facing HIV/AIDS epidemics. By encouraging Russia to address this serious issue and by funding comprehensive prevention and treatment efforts Western governments and NGOs can make a difference.

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