

Drug policy in Russia is a dangerous subject. When I started researching this topic, I was apprehensive about writing about it, because so many people who have tried to help have ended up in prison, beaten in police departments, or accused of drug dealing. There have been many shocking cases, where drug users or people trying to protect their rights have been repressed. Some of those cases became known worldwide, like Irina Teplinskaya (*DDN*, May, page 20) or Denis Matveev, a Russian human rights activist who was accused of drug trafficking on a fabricated case, and sentenced to six years in a high-level security prison.

There are many more cases, which is why there are not too many people ready to fight for the human rights of drug users. They have practically no rights in Russia, and drugs have become an easy tool of repression – not just of those who talk about drug policy, but any activists who provide social critique of the state. Given police and court corruption, and common use of provocation and planting of drugs as a mean to increase arrests, anyone can be planted with drugs and the case would not be even properly investigated.

‘Once I was arrested and beaten at the police station, because they accused me of drug dealing,’ says Alexander Delphinov, a writer and journalist, who also works as an activist and social worker with drug users during his free time. ‘I didn’t have any drugs with me, and didn’t use any. After several hours of mental pressing and beating they asked me to sign papers, to confess to a crime that I didn’t do. I was very scared, and if they continued any longer I would have signed anything, even a confession to something I hadn’t done, just for it to stop.’

Drug addicts are met with zero tolerance in Russian society. There are no proper therapies and HIV-positive drug users or those with TB can’t get proper treatment, because doctors tell them to stop using drugs first. Every day people die of HIV through drug addiction, and the only detoxification therapy that exists treats the physical problem but does nothing to address the psychological issues of drug use. The state authorities admit that 92 per cent of people who go through the state detox relapse within one year. The government does very little to promote drug rehabilitation centres, and the internationally accepted opioid substitution treatment with methadone or buprenorphine is illegal and opposed by the government.

There is only one non-governmental organisation in Russia that tries to make a difference to drug policy – Andrey Rylkov’s Foundation for Health and Social Justice. I spent a day with the activists from ARF, helping drug users on the streets of Moscow. ARF provides users with clean needles, condoms, rapid testing and counselling for HIV and hepatitis C, drug harm reduction advice and referral to medical institutions.

Such social work is very important, because sometimes it’s the only one way for drug users to communicate with people outside their criminal environment. ARF can’t afford offices – they don’t receive any government funding and exist with the help of private donations and small international grants, providing their guerrilla outreach services in a city whose mayorate openly opposes any harm reduction and HIV prevention work with drug users.

Following the group of activists from ARF, I saw their work on the streets from the inside. Since resources are scarce, there are usually only two people in the group, going onto the streets every day. Their limited resources mean that they can

only help a few drug users each day, and they are in constant fear of being arrested by the police, who would try to get information about places and drug suppliers from them by any means possible.

‘We can’t publicly distribute syringes. Even though it’s not illegal in Moscow, the city health department opposes it,’ says Maxim Malishev, ARF social worker. ‘But we can be accused of propaganda for drugs, if we do it publicly. We don’t have a drop-in centre, a mobile unit, or any premises, like most programmes in the west do. All this limits our reach to drug users and scope of services we can provide.’ Maxim was a heroin addict for 15 years, but ARF helped him to stop using drugs by sending him to drug rehabilitation in the Republic of Tatarstan. Now he helps people like him, sharing his positive experience and help.

We began outside the Moscow railway underground station, looking for any groups of people who could be drug users. When I realised that we could be arrested at any time, even though we were not doing anything illegal, I was worried but fortunately we did not encounter any police.

Maxim spotted several people, who we helped that day – we offered them HIV tests, clean syringes, leaflets, and advice on what to do in the case of an overdose. One of the drug users, aged 34, said, ‘I would like to stop using drugs, because I have serious health problems. The quality of drugs has become worse, and the prices have risen dramatically. I was in hospital twice, doing detox therapy, but as soon as I returned to the same environment I couldn’t fight my psychological addiction.’

‘Several years ago, when I was a drug user, I was caught by police with a small amount of heroin for personal use,’ says Maxim. ‘When they analysed the substance, it actually only contained 3 per cent heroin – the other 97 per cent was harmful infusions. If we had substitution treatment with methadone, it would not only reduce the amount of HIV transmitted by injections, it would also improve the quality of life for drug users and make them less criminal. When you have to spend all the time trying to find money, often by criminal means, to buy the drug, you can’t even think about giving up the addiction.’

That day I saw many drug users of different social classes. I was surprised that all of them took the leaflets and listened to everything activists were telling them. It seemed to me that all of them were willing to quit their addiction, but afterwards Maxim told me that it was mostly because of the high prices and bad quality of the drugs.

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Involvement with illegal drugs and drug users is a high-risk business in Russia, as **Kristina Kashtanova** reports



The supply of syringes and antibiotics ran out quite fast, but more and more people were coming. Some of them had wounds, some looked really ill. There was a man who was hardly walking, with one of his hands swollen. The activists knew him, but had nothing left to give him. I was really impressed when Alexander Delphinov disappeared suddenly and returned with some extra supplies he bought in the pharmacy – vitamins, ointment and bandages.

'This guy was always so cheerful,' he said. 'Just a couple of weeks ago he was going to quit using drugs and go to the hospital together with his girlfriend, who was also a drug user. He was really worried about her, and we discussed the ways they both could quit. But then she left him, and now he doesn't have the motivation to quit anymore and increased his dose. Such things happen all the time – these people are really ill and need help.'

Irina Teplinskaya was the first drug user in Russia to speak out about her rights in public. She is the face of Russian drug addicts, people without rights, without proper therapy, repressed by the government and hated by society. As soon as she began to talk openly about these problems in public, she began to be repressed. Just a while ago, she was planted with a methadone tablet on her way from Ukraine to Russia.

'They met me at the airport, eight people with a dog,' she says. 'They were really shocked, when after searching me for three hours they couldn't find anything. The tablet appeared out of nowhere – when they knew that they wouldn't be able to find anything on me, they planted it. I am sure it was connected with my activism. It was an attempt to bring down me and discredit my position, to get rid of me, because I began to sue Russia in the European Court.'

When she advocates replacement therapy, she often talks about the Ukraine's drug programme as an example. Ukraine is a former Soviet Republic, which began to apply replacement therapy 15 years ago, and now there are more than 6,000 people receiving treatment.

'I think when Federal Security Service or the Federal Drug Control Service knew that I was receiving therapy in the Ukraine, they assumed it was replacement therapy,' says Irina. 'I think they were absolutely sure that I was bringing replacement therapy drugs back with me. But they were wrong – it was three months in a drugs-free zone, doing a different kind of therapy.'

Irina works for ARF and is a member of the steering committee from Russia in

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the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network. Even though these two organisations are well known around the world and widely supported, their work goes against Russian drug policy.

'In Russia, "those who are not with us are against us", so it's rather normal that drugs are used as a tool for political repression', she says. 'It's a well-known practice that drugs are planted on objectionable people who go against the political system.'

After the drug-planting incident, Irina decided to leave Kaliningrad, the city where she lived, and move to the Republic of Tatarstan, a federal subject of Russia where drug policy is better. There are government supported syringe and needle exchange programmes, and the human rights of drug users are not violated as in Russia. 'The Tatarstan government understands that there is an epidemic of HIV, and it's impossible to stop it with only repressive measures,' she says.

Irina is HIV-positive and had several breaks in her therapy when she was using drugs. 'Drug users who need to think about getting money for their next supply, and then looking for a supplier, can't concentrate on regular medication for HIV,' she says. 'Doctors know that the drug user most likely won't be self-disciplined enough for HIV therapy, so they prescribe such therapy to this group of people quite pessimistically and often find ways to refuse, because they see it as a waste of money for the government.'

There are many problems with drug policy in Russia, and despite the activists' work to try and change the situation, their impact locally does not seem to spread to the country as a whole.

'Society should change its attitude to drug users. It should not only be written on paper that we are all citizens of this country and have our rights, but these rights should be respected in practice,' says Irina. 'People should become more tolerant to drug users. Russia should change its angle in drug policy from repressive to humane, like it is in most other countries around the world.' **DDN**

Kristina Kashtanova is a student journalist



Left: Irina Teplinskaya

Far left: Russian activists