

Document
Youngsters on drugs in Russia.



Aleksey (28) lives in a home for elderly people.

Russia's lost generation

Text and photography by Rob Hornstra

Young Russian addicts are brewing their own drugs. During the economic crisis in the 1990s, the number of hard drug users increased in Russia. An addictive generation grew up.

Moscow/Nizhni Novgorod

“Could you please switch off your phone,” Andrey asks politely but firmly. According to him, the police are everywhere and we are traceable through our cell phones. It is five to eight. We hurry across a market square in a southern suburb of the Russian capital of Moscow before the eight o'clock closing of most shops.

Before closing time we must pick up some ingredients: poppy seeds at the bakery, acetone at the spare parts store, dimedrole at the chemist. Together with Dasha and Vova we tear in Andrey's Lada

across town. “What time is it?”, Andrey asks passing cars to the nearest chemist right, left and centre. Dasha and Vova grab their phones, which are still on to check.

Mak is not only the Russian word for poppy seed but also the name of a homemade drug. The seeds are boiled in acetone. The stuff is related to chanka, chertshaska and vint, concoctions from the Soviet era when there were no drugs in Russia.

It is being made in ordinary kitchens throughout the country when there is no money for heroin. After forty-five minutes of boiling, soaking, mixing and evaporating, a few milliliters of brown liquid remains. “Proper mak has more or less the effect of heroin. But if I have money I always go for heroin,” Dasha (28) tells us.

She has been addicted to drugs ever since her highschool days. Her twelve schoolmates used

it and so did she. Her addiction, however, later turned into her job: she is now manager of Kholodets, an organisation which makes a case for the legalisation of methadone. Her drug partner, Vova, wears an orange pro-methadone T-shirt, with the slogan “Stop war on drugs. Support harm reduction. Make methadone an essential medicine NOW!”.

As it seems unlikely that the Russian government would agree to such policy, Kholodets has concentrated on spreading information about nalbupine. But this legal medication is only used under strict follow-up care and is viewed as a weaker substitute for methadone.

Once we have arrived in Andrey's apartment, Andrey and Vova get going. The kitchen smells alternately of ammonia and acetone – smells which make for an indefinable penetrating odour. After forty-five minutes, the syringes are filled

with the brown liquid that remains after the process.

The veins in the arms of the three friends are no longer usable. Vova drops his pants and without any hesitation pushes the needle into his thigh. Andrey injects himself on the back of his hand. Vova helps Dasha inject into her wrist. It is painful for her. Within a few minutes there is a swelling the size of a ping pong ball.

It is hard to imagine why Dasha is a drug addict. She has studied psychology, speaks English fluently and is well-groomed, particularly at the beginning of the evening. In the underground, going back to the city centre, she can hardly open her bloodshot eyes and mumbles incoherently. People look at her with a mix of revolt and sympathy. But Dasha pays no attention as she is too busy fiercely arguing in favour of the legalisation of methadone.

Moiseyev, a psychiatrist from Nizhni Novgorod has a completely different view of legalisation. "Legalising methadone for medical use is similar to treating an alcoholic with Martinis," he says with great irritation. Moiseyev has been working in drug addiction care for more than twenty years. His view is that such a substitute will never lead to a solution to drug addiction.

To prove his point he brings us to Ilya (25), a user who first touched drugs when he was thirteen. He has tried just

about every treatment. Ilya's world is limited: in the morning he searches for money, in the afternoon he looks for a dealer and in the evening he uses drugs.

We meet Ilya near his flat where he is muddling with his Lada. The car has to go into the garage since Ilya is being sent to prison again for attempted burglary. It is the first time that he is going to prison without having really stolen something.



In three days' time he will get the definitive sentence. His guess is about three years.

As a matter of fact he doesn't care too much. "I may have a chance in prison to kick the habit." His words do not carry much meaning when he tells in the same breath how easy it is to get drugs in prison. It is only when he speaks of his dream for the future that a faint smile appears on his face. Ilya hopes one day to get married and have kids.

On the way back psychiatrist Moiseyev tells us that Ilya is one of the few addicts who does not give a rosy picture of his life. Ilya understands that he is the only one who can change his desperate situation but also realises that he does not have the mental stamina. Moiseyev makes use of his example to make his case against methadone. "When you give free methadone to this guy he takes it sitting on the same seat next to exactly the same flat".

Ilya can at least dream about family life while Aleksey (28) seems to have lost every possible hope. He lives in a home for the elderly. It is not his choice but he is handicapped and no better care is available. One morning, about five years ago, Aleksey woke up and his foot would not move. On his way to the toilet he fell down. When he arrived at the hospital his nervous system had been affected.

It was the toll to pay for having used drugs for so many years. Every night with three friends Aleksey injected vint, a complex mix of pills dissolved and chemicals. His friends were no luckier: one has dementia, one is partly and the other completely paralysed.

In hospital Aleksey was by no means cured from his addiction. Together with another addict, he roamed throughout the building at night in search of pills. With friends they brewed their own peculiar mix and injected it into themselves. At



Dasha (28), manager of Kholodetz



Ilya (25) in the kitchen of his mother

that moment, Aleksey did not know that his hospital friend was HIV positive. He found out that he himself was HIV positive when he was admitted to the home for the elderly.

In this home the elderly had heard that Aleksey was HIV positive. Although all rooms have double occupancy it was decided that Aleksey would get his own room with shower and bathroom. His presence during meals was also not appreciated so he gets his meals delivered to his room every night.

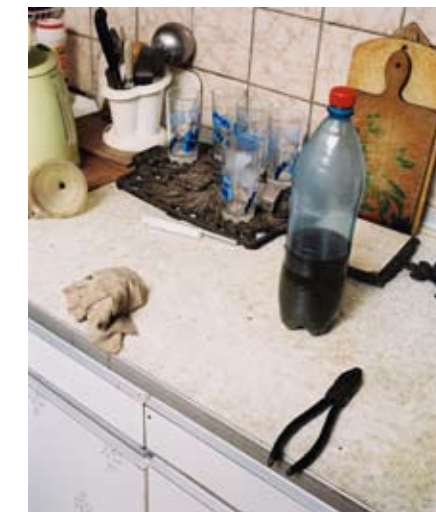
Neither did the elderly want their laundry to be mixed with his. He had his own washing machine. While the other residents get clean laundry only once every ten days, Aleksey can do laundry whenever he wishes. An enormous smile appears on Aleksey's face. "Yeah, it is discrimination but I do like these privileges."

From the minimal welfare that Aleksey receives he was able to buy a Playstation computer game after two years' savings. His mother died. His father is an alcoholic, as is his youngest brother. His eldest brother is a pickpocket somewhere in the south of the country. Only Lyosia, volunteer with an organisation for people with HIV, visits him every fortnight. They usually play a game of chess. Aleksey always wins.

The Russian government seems to be underestimating the consequences of drugs among its young citizens. In

spite of successful programs proven abroad, the current government is not only against the supply of methadone but also against changing used needles for clean ones. President Putin believes that such programs simply support drug users.

The fact that there has been a decline in the use of drugs among young people in puberty may have to do with the improved perspectives on the



future. And with the financial support of local organisations who are funded by foreign organisations such as UNAIDS. On May 1, 2007 the financial support for the nalbupine program of Dasha's organisation Kholodets was stopped. The Russian government has not been convinced of its merits.

With thanks to AIDS Foundation East-West (AFEW) and the Anna Cornelis Foundation.

Read more about the drug organisation Kholodets on website drugpolicy.ru

Two percent of Russian people use hard drugs

-The number of hard drug users grew explosively during the economic crisis in the 1990s.

The Ukrainian city of Odessa counted approximately 6,000 "injecting" drug users in 1990. In 1997 this number was 5 or 6 times higher (35,000 to 40,000). The Russian city of St. Petersburg had about 200,000 hard drug users in that year, one in every twenty St. Petersburgers.

-Estimates on the total number of Russian hard drug users vary.

The drug combatting organisation of the United Nations (UNODC) applies the numbers of the Russian government estimating the total number of hard drug users on two million which is two percent of the population between 15 and 64.

-In 2005, 17% of this group (343,509 people) were treated in special clinics, slightly more than in 2004. The previous five years showed a recurrent slight decline in the number of addicts admitted to clinics.

-In Russia an annual eighty metric ton of heroin is being consumed.

Approximately 70% of the drug users in Russia, Ukraine and Moldavia also use, or maybe only use homemade opiates.

-Most raw materials for hard drugs (papaver) enter Russia through a link of Central Asiatic couriers from Afghanistan.

Laboratories in Russia process the papaver to opiates. The UNODC statistics show that most drug laboratories worldwide were rounded up in Russia (43%), followed by Moldavia (33%) and Afghanistan (22%).