

YOUTH AT RISK

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INTRODUCTION

////// During the last few decades, the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia went through a radical and painful economic transformation after the fall of communism. Under the previous authoritarian regimes, the state provided employment and social services to everyone. Political and economic liberalisation diminished the role of the state in society and often removed the safety net that it provided - particularly for young people.

While many of the countries of this region have enjoyed democracy and civil liberties since the early 1990s, social challenges that did not exist before are taking a toll on their young people.

This age group is disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment, underemployment, the HIV epidemic, inadequate education systems, lack of security and human rights abuses, international migration and the lack of space to participate in civic and political activities.

These issues do not impinge on all young people to the same degree. Minorities, young women, the poor and the disabled are particularly susceptible to these problems. The lack of recognition of the special challenges that confront young people and the scarcity of data on this particular age group have rendered it difficult to formulate youth-specific policies.

There are more than 173 million young people living in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, making up almost one fifth of the population in the region. A significant number of young people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia live in poverty, with estimates that more than 22 million live on less than 2 USD a day and 5.8 million are undernourished.

This exhibition has been developed and curated by the United Nations Population Fund's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia with the aim to give voice to vulnerable youth whose stories might not otherwise be heard. These youth are vulnerable due to their socio-economic status, lack of employment opportunities, gender or lack of access to quality schooling. In other cases, they may be at risk of violence or HIV infection, or belong to a minority ethnic or sexual group. They are young girls who are at risk of becoming pregnant while young, or youth who struggle to raise the children they bore as adolescents.

The United Nations Population Fund is committed to working with governments to realise the rights of young people and to provide a space and a voice for youth perspectives to be heard.

YOUTH AT RISK

The five young people you will meet in this presentation are struggling with a host of social and economic problems common to Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Each faces a unique set of challenges, but all share an uncommon determination to do whatever it takes to make a better life for themselves and their families.

///// In Armenia, Marie Okhoyan lives with her two small children, parents and seven siblings in a filthy, rundown building outside the capital, Yerevan. The family is so poor they had to send some of the children, including Marie when she was a girl, to state-run institutions just to make sure they were fed. By some estimates, the poverty rate is as high as 71 per cent in Armenia, yet 19-year-old Marie believes she can break this vicious cycle of poverty.

Aiman Sooronkulov struggles with a different set of problems. The 19-year-old spent his childhood and adolescence in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, trying to come to grips with a dawning awareness that he was different from the other boys. Once he accepted that he wasn't straight, he began to work with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) to educate youth about sexual and reproductive health and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Among the Roma people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, lack of access to education is a critical problem for young women including Arnela Zahirovic. The 15-year-old girl, who lives with her parents and 11 siblings outside Sarajevo, had to drop out of primary school because her father forbade her to attend. A recent report found that half of all Roma women never attended school or completed primary school, and nearly half get married and have children before age 18. Yet Arnela is working



MARIE'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

with a Roma women's organisation to finish her schooling at home. Twenty-year-old Edvina Beganović is also active in the organisation. When her father lost his job, she sacrificed her education to help the family, but she still hopes to continue her schooling. "The crucial thing," she says, is "to do something worthy, which will help me be independent one day."

In Ukraine, anywhere from 120,000 to 300,000 young people are living on the streets without adequate food, shelter or clothing, vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse, physical and sexual violence, and sexually transmitted infections. Nadia is one of them. The 17-year-old girl ran away from home a year ago because of conflicts with her family. In Kiev, the richest city in Ukraine, she slept in a series of makeshift shelters before settling into an abandoned building with her boyfriend, Alex. Recently she has been going to a crisis centre for girls and young women run by an NGO, which provides social, psychological, medical and legal services for runaways like Nadia.

For Nadia, as well as for Arnela, Edvina, Aiman and Marie, the future is far from certain. Many challenges lie ahead. But none of them is discouraged. Each believes that he or she can make the world a better place for young and vulnerable people like themselves, provided that their voices, and perspectives, can be heard.

ARMENIA

GAYANE ABRAHAMYAN WRITER

ANAHIT HAYRAPETYAN PHOTOGRAPHER



Nineteen-year-old Marie Okhoyan lives in a muddy basement with her two small children. The shabby, three-story building, a hostel during Soviet times, is home to 10 families with about 30 young children. They share the space with scorpions and rats.

///// Marie's parents live on the first floor with seven children ranging from 16 to 3 months. Marie, their only adult child, looks after her own kids and also her siblings.

This was not the future her parents had in mind when they married her off at age 14 to a young man they had met only

once. Now all she remembers is how he beat and humiliated her, making her cook and wait on his mistress.

"One day I simply couldn't bear it anymore and preferred to return to this hell where, at least, nobody was abusing me," she says.

After her return, Marie married another man, but that didn't last long; in 2009, he got in a car accident and ended up in prison.

Marie and the others reside some 18 km from the capital city of Yerevan, in the former industrial town of Yeghvard, whose factories are now in ruins.

Unemployment is high in this town of 14,000. Officially, it's 10 per cent, but analysts say it's much higher.

All of the country's thorny issues can be found here: poverty, starving children, disease, prostitution, and youth at risk of becoming trafficking targets.

Many of Marie's acquaintances have fallen into the hands of pimps; even she almost fell into the trap when someone called her and said there was a good job for her. "I thought it would really be a proper job, but when I went there and saw the women, I ran away," she says.

MARIE





//// For her, the way out is her parents. Her mother works for the municipality and cleans houses and yards; her father digs graves. The only memento of the good old times, when the family had a house and proper jobs, is a large Soviet flag hanging on the door instead of a curtain.

The entire family receives about 200 USD in poverty benefits from the state, hardly enough to feed all those hungry mouths.

Officially, the poverty rate in 20-year-old independent Armenia is 34 per cent but some claim that by UN standards, it's actually 71 per cent.

Armenia's half a million young people face even greater difficulties; some 29 per cent of those with higher education are unemployed, and there are almost no jobs for young people from vulnerable groups.

“I PREFERRED TO RETURN TO THIS HELL.”

Marie says she'd like to find a job, but she doesn't have much education. Yet in her voice, you can hear her resolve to find a way out. She says she'll do "whatever it takes" to give her children a better life.

Despite her gentle, fragile appearance, Marie's words brim with confidence. "I believe everything will be all right," she says. "I believe that one day we will break the cycle of poverty."

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

BELMA BEĆIRBAŠIĆ WRITER

ARMIN SMAILOVIĆ PHOTOGRAPHER

Arnela Zahirovic is 15 and dreams of becoming a hairdresser one day. It's a dream that may never come true because Arnela left school in December. Her father forbade her from going to school.

///// "He thinks that since he hasn't studied himself, his children shouldn't either," Arnela's mother, Refija, says. "We don't have any money for school books because everything he earns has been spent on alcohol."

Arnela has 11 brothers and sisters. They live together in one room of a ruined house in the remote settlement of Visoko, 30 km from Sarajevo. Arnela sits down on one of two broken couches, the only furniture in the room, and talks about her school days.



"The teacher always gave me bad grades, despite the fact that she knew I had no place to study and that books were expensive," she says. "Even other children in the classroom never helped me. They would tell me I'm a dirty and smelly Roma girl."

Arnela says that despite her father's threats, she would like to finish school. A visitor, Melina Halilovic from the Roma women's organisation Be My Friend, comforts her, telling her she will make sure Arnela finishes primary school.

Arnela is enthusiastic, then gets up to look at her reflection in a

picture that serves as a mirror – an old black-and-white photograph of Tito. Almost all Roma families keep a picture of the former Yugoslav leader in their homes. It reminds them of a time when Roma were equal.

Today, Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina are second-class citizens. Although they constitute the largest ethnic minority, estimated at more than 50,000, they are among the most discriminated against. Only 2-3 per cent work in the public sector, and poverty among Roma is four times higher than the national average.

ARNELA



EDVINA





“ROMA ARE SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS.”

//// Recently, Roma women’s organisations published the first report on domestic violence against Roma women in Bosnia. It showed that most Roma women do not have the formal education and training required for the labour market and survive by collecting recyclable materials or working illegally. Half never attended school nor completed primary school. Only 2 per cent graduated from a college or university.

Halilovic, whose organisation participated in the study and organises workshops on literacy, helps girls who have no access to education. Twenty-year-old Edvina Beganović is active in the association. When her father lost his job in an industrial plant, she sacrificed her education for the survival of the family. Today, her father collects and recycles iron, and Edvina and her mother work as cleaners in a local bakery.

Edvina still hopes to continue her education. But for now, she can hardly wait to go to the bakery the next day since her boss is teaching her to make cakes, pies and bread after work.

“I am not ashamed of anything, not even having dropped out

of school; I did this to help us survive,” she says. “And I am not ashamed for being a Roma. The crucial thing to me is just to learn to do something worthy, which will help me be independent one day.”

KYRGYZSTAN

ELENA VORONINA WRITER

ERKINBEK BOLZHUROV PHOTOGRAPHER



Hello, my name is Aiman Sooronkulov. I am 19, and I work for a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and as a volunteer for Y-PEER.

///// It seems to me that the moment I first realised that life can be cruel was when I was 8 and my parents divorced. My grandmother took care of me for nine years in the Kyrgyzstan capital of Bishkek. I tried to obey her and do well in school. But I didn't always succeed. Grandma thought that since I lived with her, I should belong only to her.

Eventually I began to understand why she tried so hard to be protective. It was because I was

different. At school, I didn't pay attention to the girls. I didn't fight with the boys, but I wanted to be near them. Soon, I was being mocked. I didn't understand what was happening.

Today I know who I am. Yes, I am not straight. I like men more than women, and I want to be liked by them. Back then, there was no one to give me advice or comfort me; I felt as though I couldn't share my feelings with anyone else on Earth.

By age 17, I was fully aware that I was not like most of my peers. After analysing my life, I decided I shouldn't expect someone else to make my wishes come true. I had to do something, so I packed my bags and left my grandmother's home.

For two days I lived in the street. On the third morning, I met some young people, perfect strangers to

me. They were members of a group called Indigo, and their job was to educate young people about the prevention of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

While rescuing others, a person rescues him or herself – this saying perfectly describes the activities of Indigo. Later I began to work for Indigo and also for the youth network Y-PEER.

AIMAN





///// Y-PEER is like a huge international family, where a young person can find a friend or get help, advice and knowledge.

I came to realise that most young people would like to get advice and support from their parents or relatives. However, with rare exceptions, parents can't talk with them about sexual and reproductive health. Today when I meet with young people, I see that addressing issues of sexual and

reproductive health is important not only for them, but also for their parents.

In the last two years I've changed a lot. I'm not afraid anymore. Now I can show others how important it is to have the courage to accept yourself the way you are.

Today, I try to open my heart to the world and appreciate every moment of life. That helps me in my daily work with young people.

“FOR TWO DAYS I LIVED IN THE STREETS.”

In Kyrgyzstan, 38.8 per cent of the total number of people identified as living with HIV are young people between ages 15 and 29. That is why it is so important to educate adolescents on issues of sexual and reproductive health.

By the way, do you want to know how my name is translated from the Kyrgyz language? “The unbending one.” My life is in my name.

UKRAINE

YULIYA ABIBOK WRITER

VALENTIN KHRYSTYCH PHOTOGRAPHER



A year ago, Nadia left her home in a small town in southern Ukraine and arrived in the capital, Kiev. The 17-year-old girl squats in an abandoned building with her boyfriend, Alex.

///// Alex is 19 and has lived on the streets since he was 8. Recently he and his girlfriend, Nadia, were kicked off the construction site by a guard from a posh new building nearby, but they have returned because they have nowhere else to go.

Nadia is one of an estimated 120,000 to 300,000 boys and girls in Ukraine who live on the streets

without adequate food, clothing and shelter. She doesn't want to use her last name because she has run away from home.

Nadia's father died when she was 5, leaving her mother to raise three daughters on the meager welfare payments – about 100 USD per child – provided by the state to single mothers.

She dropped out of high school after ninth grade. She knew going to college was not possible because the family had no money. She entered a local technical/vocational school to become a cook but didn't have enough money for that either.

“My family began to have financial problems because of my studies,” she says. “The money and constant conflicts in the family were the main reasons why I ran away from home.”

Since arriving in Kiev, Nadia has lived in a train station, an abandoned house and a basement

with 10 other street children. After she met Alex, she briefly moved into his rented room, but when he lost his job in a sawmill outside Kiev, they were both on the streets.

Today, Nadia's dream is to find a job that would let her rent a room. Alex collects paper and metal on the streets to buy them food.

About five months ago, Nadia started going to a crisis centre for girls and young women run by the NGO HealthRight International. “I come here almost every day to take a shower, wash clothes, eat,” she says.

NADIA





***“MY FAMILY
BEGAN TO HAVE
FINANCIAL
PROBLEMS
BECAUSE OF
MY STUDIES.”***

The centre provides social, psychological, medical and legal support to more than 300 girls like Nadia. Most of them come from difficult family situations and live on the streets.

The centre is helping Nadia enroll in a vocational school and find a place in a hostel. Nadia says if she goes back to school, her mother, who has health problems and can't work, will continue to receive benefits for her even after she turns 18. "When we were young, parents cared about us,

and when they are old, we must care about them," she says. // // // //

Despite everything that has happened to her, Nadia, whose Russian name means "hope," hasn't given up. She keeps up her spirits reading books and writing poetry.

"One day, I think I will write my autobiography. I will write how I rose from the bottom of society to become a real person," she says. "And I will tell other girls like myself how to survive."

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