

GLOBAL VOICES

The dark side of Prague

20 years after the upheavals in Eastern and Central Europe, Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, now has a drug problem similar to that of every other major European city. Ales Herzog and other street counsellors in the city are trying to limit the problems

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The young woman pulls out old used disposable syringes from her little handbag. They all end up in a yellow plastic bucket placed on the floor in front of her. She is quick, almost feverish, as though she doesn't want to risk any of the passers-by noticing what she is doing. She counts out loud, 23, 24....

"How many syringes have you got with you," asks Ales Herzog. Under the rules of the Sananim drug scheme, a new syringe is handed out for every one brought in, but Ales Herzog and his colleague Svitlana Golubjeva take this rule with a pinch of salt and are happy to distribute more syringes. They believe it is worthwhile.

The young woman is also given ointment for sores, condoms and other necessities.

"Take care, see you soon," says Ales Herzog in a tender voice.

Ales Herzog is a social worker and leads a team of 14 street counsellors in Prague city centre. Their task is to work among and seek out Prague's drug addicts. Today he and Svitlana Golubjeva are standing in a passage close to the Museum underground station in the centre of Prague. Their clients know that the enormous suitcase standing next to them is not intended for a journey. It

will never make it to Gran Canaria or any of the other sunny holiday destinations advertised by a neighbouring travel agency. It is full of disposable syringes and other things drug addicts need.

More important than a high salary

"Our work consists of distributing disposable syringes, having a chat and lending a helping hand whenever somebody needs one. We are in contact with some 2,000 drug addicts and distribute between 500 and a 1000 syringes everyday," says Ales Herzog.

He is 32 and originally a trained economist. As an economist he could earn more money than in his current job. But it wasn't the high wages that attracted him when he graduated from the Prague Business School. "I was eager to work with people and do something meaningful. For me it's more important to have a job with a purpose than a job which is just a source of income," he says.

So Ales Herzog took a post graduate course including several social education courses, and today he has more or less completed his studies as a social educator. Svitlana Golubjeva, who accompanies Ales Herzog, was originally from Siberia in Russia. She speaks fluent Russian and can reach out to drug addicts who cannot speak Czech. "We have a number of people from the former Soviet republics who are legally or illegally residing in the Czech Republic, and who have ended up among the city's drug addicts. With Svitlana's help we can also help them and listen to their problems," says Ales Herzog.

Drugs with freedom

Drug problems were among the consequences which followed in the wake of the upheavals in the Czech Republic after the country's so-called velvet revolution in November 1989. Drug abuse



in the Czech Republic, which was more or less unheard of during the communist era, exploded and the country was soon suffering drug abuse problems. Today the situation has stabilised and the problems the Czech Republic has with drug abuse are similar to those in every other European nation. Ales Herzog estimates that there are currently about 8,000 drug addicts in Prague and some 35,000 in the entire country. He believes that the relatively short history of drug problems in the Czech Republic, are a clear advantage compared with other European countries. "As a result, our clients are used to viewing us as part of the drug scene, and they are used to using our services. Among other things, this is of great significance in halting the spread of HIV infections. Measured by the number of people infected by HIV, the Czech Republic is relatively low on the list compared to other European countries," says Ales Herzog.

Mutual respect

He stresses that contacts between his staff and drug addicts are based on mutual respect. "Our clients respect the unwritten rules about not dealing with drugs and not behaving aggressively

when we are around. On the other hand, we strive not to preach and not to try and persuade people to go into treatment. Naturally we are always there to help if clients themselves wish to do something about their addiction. It's great when it happens, but the main purpose of our work is to make life more secure and bearable for our clients, and of course to protect the public at large against the spread of such diseases as HIV and Hepatitis A," says Ales Herzog.

The close contact between street counsellors and drug addicts also means that the street counsellors can monitor the scope of the drug addiction problem. Drug addicts are registered with a code, which makes it possible to monitor their addictions.

All hand-outs of disposable syringes etc and the dates of such hand-outs are recorded. It is voluntary whether drug addicts allow themselves to be registered, but as Ales Herzog and his staff guarantee complete anonymity, most are happy to let themselves be registered.

Here at the passage at the Museum underground station Alex Herzog and Svitlana Golubjeva distribute new disposable syringes to Prague's drug addicts.