

Home without AIDS: Italy begins to pay attention to the health of Ukrainians

Natalia A. Feduschak (USA)

ROME, Italy – Bishop Hlib Lonchyna stood before a table filled with candles and icons, arms raised and began a prayer.

Momentarily, several others joined him, filling the small room with a subdued medley of voices. Then the solemn mass abruptly ended, and the chamber exploded in ovation, laughter and lively chatter in the Ukrainian and Italian languages.

Throughout the mass, the driving force behind the event, Olha Yezerska, stood alone near an open door, apparently nervous. It was only after the mass ended, and well-wishers hugged and shook her hand, that a smile crossed her face.

“It has taken ten years for us to finally get organized as a community,” Ms. Yezerska said of a health consultation center that was unveiled earlier this year by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Caritas Roma for Ukrainian migrants. “But health is an important issue and our people need to get information and know their rights. Of course that includes HIV/AIDS.”

Italy, in the last decade, has become a favorite destination for Ukrainian migrants looking for employment as it becomes harder to find work in Ukraine because of a tough job market. Today, anywhere between 500,000-700,000 Ukrainians make this Mediterranean country their home. Of those, about 150,000 are in Italy legally, and have a work permit called a *permesso*. Indeed, so many Ukrainians now work in Italy that it is not unusual to hear the Ukrainian language spoken in and around the museums of Rome, in the metro stations of Milan or the street corners of Naples.

The influx of migrants, however, has also given rise to a new set of problems both in Italy and in Ukraine, particularly when it comes to the health of migrants and the citizens of the countries where they make their new home.

Increasingly in Italy -- and throughout Europe -- officials are seeing the continued growth of migration as straining their health sectors and affecting issues related to national security. From an economic point of view, many Italians complain that migrants are taking away blue-collar jobs from the local population. Because so many of Italy's 4 million migrants are in the country illegally, they are helping spur a shadow economy and thus robbing the country of taxes that should be used to improve the country's health and social services, Italian media and citizens complain.

Authorities in Ukraine, on the other hand, are concerned that the outflow of workers to Italy and other European countries is also negatively impacting their nation.

For one, Ukrainian officials publicly worry about the country's demographic decline and the effect that will have on the economy. Since 1991, Ukraine has seen its population fall by some 5 million people, many of whom have migrated westward. HIV/AIDS, along with migration, has robbed Ukraine of desperately needed funds to shore up health and social services, according to a 2005 report by Ukraine's health ministry.

In addition, Italians and Ukrainians who work with Ukrainian migrants in Italy said they are uncertain about the health status of Ukrainian migrants because so many live outside the reach of organizations that can help them. Thus, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) and emotional issues are unknown

because statistics are simply unavailable. In addition, it is difficult to ascertain which illnesses migrants may contract and spread once they are in Europe, and then return home permanently or for visits.

Still, as migration and global health begin to take center stage in international politics, in interviews throughout Italy, Ukrainian migrants and those individuals who work with them said the link between migration, national security, and health issues such as HIV/AIDS and other and STDs merits further research.

“This remains an unknown,” said Ms. Yezerska.

The health consultation center that Ms. Yezerska helped found is intended to get a better handle on the health of Italy’s Ukrainian migrant community, as well as provide information to migrants in and around Rome. It grew out of the recognition that health matters often fall on the list of priorities for migrants working abroad, she said. Because so many migrants in Italy are from Western Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which co-sponsors the center, has become the focal point of community life. Although the largest numbers of Ukrainians working in Italy are located in the south, Rome still remains the heart of the community, and its organizations are the most mature.

Ms. Yezerska, who was a doctor in Western Ukraine before she went to Italy for economic reasons, said it was particularly important that women be encouraged to take better care of their health.

Unlike other European countries, a large number of Ukrainian migrants working in Italy are women, who are lured by the abundance of jobs in the country’s flourishing home healthcare sector, or, for some, in the sex industry. This makes them vulnerable to acquiring a host of illnesses, including HIV/AIDS, STDS, and TB. Many of these women live either in the homes of the people they work for, or with men who are willing to provide housing in exchange for sexual favors.

“The first need women have is for prevention,” said Ms. Yezerska, who is undergoing medical qualification in Italy. “Too many are working on the street, or are in very delicate or dangerous situations. We are creating the consulting center so people know how to get medical help and so they know what can threaten their life, what issues can affect their lives.”

Particularly for women, it is critical that gynecological screening be a priority, she said. The consultation center will highlight women’s health issues, and psychological support.

“Many of the women leave their families,” to work in Italy, said Ms. Yezerska. “It’s important to know how to deal with that.”

Italy still lacks special programs that cater to its fast growing migrant community, particularly when it comes to health issues, and illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, TB and STDs. Some of that work is left to Caritas, the charitable arm of the Catholic Church, which provides social services for the newly arrived and those in need.

“Only three percent of migrants go for health care,” said Michela Martini, coordinator for Migration and Health in the Mediterranean region in Rome’s office of the International Organization for Migration. “People come here with no information and no tools. Because of the situation, they become vulnerable.”

Italy passed a law in 1998 that guarantees medical services for both legal and illegal workers. Many Ukrainians, however, are afraid to turn to Italian medical services

for help because they think doctors will turn them into the police and they will be deported.

Salvatore Geraci, an administrator with Caritas Roma, said he hopes the Ukrainian health consulting center will remove some of that fear and Ukrainian migrants will become more comfortable with the Italian medical system and will take better care of themselves.

“For Ukrainians, their medical system (historically) gave them the possibility to listen and to be informed,” he said in an interview at his office near Rome’s central train station. “We want to orient Ukrainians here to go to the right places, to educate them about health. But this work must be done together with the Italians.”

Although Caritas has existed for nearly a quarter century, Mr. Geraci said the organization only started getting involved in health issues around seven years ago. Mr. Geraci admitted there is “frustration” over the health of migrants in Italy.

Italian officials admitted in interviews they don’t fully know what illnesses migrants may bring into the country, especially if they enter illegally, or the effect that may have on its own citizens. That is particularly true if Italians and migrants enter into sexual relations, which may increase the spread of HIV/AIDS, gonorrhea and other STDs.

In interviews, migrants coyly admitted they often don’t practice safer sex practices while in Italy, and then have sexual relations with partners in Ukraine when they return home for visits.

Mario Tronka is president of the Italian-Ukrainian Cultural Christian Association in Rome. For nearly a decade, his organization has worked with Ukrainian migrants, helping them navigate the realities of Italian life.

Today, the organization’s offices are located near the Rebibia metro station, on the outskirts of Rome, at the edge of a field where thousands of Ukrainians gather every Sunday. There, they hear mass, drop off packages with *marshrutka* drivers who will deliver them to family in Ukraine, look for jobs and roommates on an imposing board which has hundreds of postings, and spend the afternoon drinking Ukrainian beer and vodka.

Mr. Tronka said early on his organization recognized that health was often overlooked among Ukrainian migrants. Thus, it made arrangements with several clinics for free health testing.

On the positive side, he said women in recent years have called on the organization for help in finding proper prenatal care. On the negative side, he has noticed an increase in people who have turned to him after they discovered they were HIV-positive. At least 20 people have done so in the last four years; whether they acquired the virus at home or in Italy was uncertain.

“I told them they could stay in Italy and get free health care,” Mr. Tronka said. Most, however, opted to return home.

“In this situation, they wanted to be with their families, even if they never revealed their HIV status,” said Mr. Tronka. “I understand them.”

This type of situation, however, may put a strain on the health sector in the home country, migrants and Italians said in interviews. Economic migrants often return to countries that are ill equipped to handle patients with difficult medical conditions.

Ukrainian migrants admitted they also worry about the effect their absence has on their children and their health. Families' economic situations may improve if one or both parents work abroad, but divided families are strained, they said.

Young people without parental control are more likely to engage in risky behavior, which include unsafe sex practices and drinking heavily. These are linked to acquiring HIV/AIDS and other STDS, according to experts in Ukraine and abroad.

"My daughter is now twelve," a 30-something Ukrainian woman said during an interview on a sunny Rome day. "Her grandmother cares for her, but do I know what she is really doing? Does she drink? Is she sexually active? I have been here for six years, I see her once a year. How can I really know?"

To help migrants better know their rights and inform them of issues that may affect them once in Italy, some Italian media outlets recently started publishing newspapers geared toward migrant communities. One of Italy's leading newspapers, *la Repubblica*, publishes a special weekly newspaper called *la Repubblica Metropoli*. The Stranieri in Italia publishing house supports monthly newspapers printed in 16 languages. One of those publications is *Ukrainska Hazeta*.

Issues covered in both papers include what documents migrants need to become a legal worker, housing and health issues.

Earlier this year, *Ukrainianska Hazeta* ran a series on family planning and different contraception methods to prevent not only pregnancy, but also HIV/AIDS and STDS, said Marianna Soronevych, who co-edits the paper.

"The percentage of youth coming to Italy is growing as parents become legalized and bring their families here. Most people, for instance, don't know the problem of HIV. People really haven't heard about the dangers. That's why we wrote about the different types of contraceptives."

P.S. Natalia A. Feduschak is an international fellow with the U.S.-based Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit, private operating foundation focusing on major health care issues (www.kff.org). The International Journalism Project is a new initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) to support journalists with a strong interest in reporting on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and related health issues.

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