

Ukrainian workers got equal access to medical care: legalization of nearly 200,000 hired workers in Portugal significantly improved the level of their health care

Natalia A. Feduschak USA

LISBON, Portugal -- Caterina Reis Oliveira pulled a thick green paperback book from a file cabinet and handed it to a visitor.

“It’s about the social standing of Ukrainian migrants,” said Ms. Oliveira, sitting back down at her desk in the main office of Portugal’s migration commission. “The government commissioned the study. It’s important to know about the people who are living here.”

Located at the southernmost part of Europe on the Iberian Peninsula, Portugal has often been at the crossroads of migratory processes between the Continent and North Africa. While a large number of migrants have traditionally come from countries that share historic, linguistic and cultural ties with Portugal, in recent years the country has seen an influx of Eastern Europeans, particularly from Ukraine, Moldova and Romania.

Many of these migrants have been lured by jobs in the country’s fast-growing construction industry, while seasonal workers have worked in the agricultural sector. Unlike many European countries, however, which are worried about an increase in illegal migration and the social disruption that often brings, the majority of Portugal’s migrant workers are in the country today legally.

In an attempt to better control its migration, the government several years ago carried out an amnesty that legalized 187,000 individuals who had been working in Portugal illegally. The amnesty has positively affected Portugal and its migrant communities by significantly changing the political and social climate in the country for the better, experts and Ukrainian migrants said.

“After the wave of legalization, people don’t feel the same fear they had before,” said Henrique Barros, director of Portugal’s National Coordination Council for HIV/AIDS in Lisbon. “A large number of migrants were integrated into society in Portugal. Migrants are beginning to have a new sense of life here.”

With a population of just over 10 million people, Portugal is now receiving additional taxes from those who received amnesty. Those monies have helped shore up medical care and other social services for which legal migrants now qualify. The government has also cracked down on illegal migration, with new migration consisting largely of family reunification or individuals who have special work permits approved by the government.

Most importantly, however, the amnesty has helped people from falling into poverty and acquiring diseases that are often associated with the poor – HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), said Mr. Barros. That has been an important step in ensuring Portugal’s security and stability since the health of migrants has become a priority for the Portuguese, he said.

“HIV is security problem for the world,” Mr. Barros said. “We are convinced people can get infected because they circulate in less favorable (economic) groups. Certainly this is difficult to prove, but if people can climb up the social scale, they decrease their probability of getting infected because they have what they need in life.”

Although Portugal has the highest HIV/AIDS in Western Europe, Mr. Barros said he believed the situation was under control. The government regularly looks at ways to ensure migrants and residents receive information about the virus and that prevention programs are in place, he said. That includes streamlining bureaucracy so migrants can more easily access health and social services.

The study the Portuguese government commissioned about Ukrainian migrants and that Ms. Oliveira had pulled from her file cabinet does not address illnesses they may have acquired while in Portugal or before they entered the country. Rather, it looks at the social environment in which Ukrainians live and provides a demographic breakdown of who is in Portugal. Currently, some 70,000 Ukrainians live in the country legally, with an additional 10,000-20,000 expecting to be legalized. Up to 80 percent of Ukrainian migrants have a university degree, community leaders here said.

Mykola Horban, president of the Association of Ukrainians in Portugal “Sobor”, said he has seen an improved difference in the health of Ukrainian migrant men in the last several years.

A construction worker by day, for the last half decade Mr. Horban has volunteered his evenings to work with Doctors of the World, a non-profit organization that provides medical care and treatment to the homeless.

Although it became a member of the European Union in 1986, Portugal has traditionally been Europe’s poorest country. Earlier this decade, however, the country received substantial assistance from the European Union for construction projects and to upgrade the country’s infrastructure, such as roads and highways. The abundance of jobs lured many men to Portugal, particularly from Western Ukraine, which remains economically depressed.

Standing outside a first aid van peppered with anti-AIDS posters near Lisbon’s central train station, Mr. Horban said that in the first half of this decade, he and his colleagues often provided medical care to Ukrainian migrant men. Most had traveled to Portugal in search of jobs in the construction industry and were reluctant to visit doctors because they were in the country illegally. Some of the men had not been able to find stable work and had ended up on the streets.

“Their health was bad,” Mr. Horban said of the Ukrainian migrant men he encountered. “Not everybody looked after it.”

Although he would not discuss medical histories in detail for reasons of confidentiality, Mr. Horban said many of the illnesses the men had acquired, including STDs, were the result of living in crowded conditions or homelessness.

“Today, however, we see fewer and fewer of our men living on the streets since the amnesty,” Mr. Horban said. “It created an equality for migrants. Most of our people today are financially better off.”

The amnesty has also meant that many of the Ukrainian men who traveled to Portugal in search of work are now being reunited with their families. Wives and children are leaving Ukraine to move to Portugal as part of a controlled migration policy.

Controlled migration is an important step in helping curb the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs, said Mr. Barros of the national HIV/AIDS council.

“If you have a family member absent, that is one of the factors of vulnerability to get HIV/AIDS because there is the absence of a regular partner,” said Mr. Barros.

“People go and have casual sex and don’t practice safe sex.”

Ukrainian migrants were reluctant to talk openly about their sexual encounters while separated from their families. Members of the community, however, privately acknowledge that extramarital relations were not uncommon. The distance between Ukraine and Portugal – 3,350 kilometers – meant that some people hadn't seen their families for many months or years at a time.

To ensure new migrants have important health information, the government publishes information about HIV/AIDS, STDs and other illnesses in the native languages of Portugal's largest migrant groups. One Russian-language brochure, for instance, lists all the places migrants can go throughout the country for HIV testing, which is free.

The government has also streamlined bureaucracy for migrants, making it less cumbersome to get all the necessary paperwork to access social services. If migrants previously needed several days to visit federal agencies scattered around Lisbon, today the government has put them all under one roof.

"It has made everything much easier," said Andriy, a doctor from Western Ukraine who has worked in Portugal for five years and who does not want his last name used. "My take home pay may be less than before, but now I qualify for all the social services, so I don't mind paying taxes. The Portuguese have been very tolerant toward migrants."

Despite the generally positive attitude expressed by Ukrainian migrants toward their host country, some in Portugal believe the government should be doing more to counter the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases among migrants and the general population.

"Prevention is not a priority and there is a lack of strategy," said Francisco Porto Ribeiro president of Abraco (Associacao de Apoio a Pessoas com VIH/SIDA), the country's leading non-profit group dealing with HIV/AIDS issues.

The organization has helped many migrants, including several from Ukraine, who are HIV-positive with psychological support, medical care, clothing and legal advice.

Abraco's main office occupies part of a bottom floor in a complex of low-rise apartment buildings inhabited mostly by migrants in the Lisbon suburbs. Here, people living with HIV are able to receive free meals, medical and dental care and clothing. Injecting drug users are able to exchange used needles for new ones and receive condoms. The group runs three other similar centers throughout the country.

Several individuals from Ukraine are clients at the Lisbon center, but declined to be interviewed for this article.

The Portuguese government is chronically short of funds for prevention programs, said Mr. Ribeiro, although he admitted those people who need medication for HIV/AIDS get it. In addition, the government has mandated that all pregnant women undergo testing for HIV.

Mr. Ribeiro said the government typically carries out a major anti-AIDS campaign only once a year. In addition, although the government provided some funding for Abraco, the organization survives financially largely through grants and donations.

That has proven to be a challenge because Abraco is not able to expand its prevention programs, Mr. Ribeiro said. For instance, the group would like to do more outreach work within Portugal's migrant communities, but does not have the finances to do so. Last year, in an attempt to get help from the diplomatic community, Mr. Ribeiro

and his colleagues penned a letter to several embassies in Lisbon, including Ukraine's, for assistance in translating materials about HIV/AIDS.

None of the embassies did so, he said.

"HIV is no longer a fashionable subject," Mr. Ribeiro said. "If it was more fashionable or more in vogue, more would be done to fight it."

Meanwhile, the Portuguese government recently started allowing Ukrainian migrants who worked as doctors in their homeland to work in the medical profession in Portugal. It is a step that the government hopes will better the health of Portuguese society as a whole and assist in the continued integration of Ukrainian migrants.

"Ukrainians are taking a position of influence in the country," said Oksana Levkovych, who is deeply involved in Lisbon's Ukrainian community. "We are full-fledged members, with our social and medical rights defended."

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](http://www.kff.org)). The International Journalism Project is a new initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation ([www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)) to support journalists with a strong interest in reporting on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and related health issues.

To be continued

<http://www.versii.com/telegraf/material.php?id=6931&nomer=353>

16-22 February 2007