

Krokodil sinks teeth into Georgia

The use of krokodil, a harsh homemade heroin alternative, is spreading from Russia to oppressed communities in Georgia.

Michael Bird reports from Tbilisi.

Trees are poised to blossom along rows of Soviet-era blocks of naked concrete at the edge of Georgia's capital Tbilisi. We park our car in a driveway and I exit with Giorgi, an ex-user of the drug known in Russia as krokodil, a homemade desomorphine, often made with codeine and petrol. It got its name, crocodile in Russian, because of the scaly skin tissue damage it can cause. Giorgi, now a social worker for addicts, is carrying a black plastic bag of fresh needles and alcohol swabs.

We enter the open gash in a block where a door once swung. Inside the corridor one light works, while six others are blown out. We find the lift. Its cabin is deep and nearly pitch-black. The elevator jangles upward. It will only stop at the tenth floor of 14.

"You have to know," says Giorgi, "if the police storm the room, everyone inside will be arrested, including you."

"I don't think the police are following me," I reply.

"Don't worry," he laughs. "If the police are following you, I will know. I have had experience."

We leave the lift and mount concrete steps that rise at the side of the block, giving a view onto the city, framed by the green hills around Tbilisi. On the eleventh floor, we knock on the door. A dark, heavy-set man lets us inside. This is Andrei, who is 40. He pounces on the bag of needles. There are two others – both in their late 30s – Yuri and Boris.

All are unshaven, with short hair and dressed in dark Adidas tracksuits. "Take pictures," Andrei says. "But no faces."

There is an open plan kitchen and living room. The table is scattered with matches, an empty packet of pills and a bottle of drain cleaner called Krot, which in Russian means 'mole'. The TV shows the news. Georgian President [he has since left office] Mikhail Saakashvili is in Washington DC talking with US vice-president Joe Biden.

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"I do not want to be on krokodil," says Andrei. "Heroin is much better, but since Saakashvili came to power, we cannot find heroin. I used to take opium, but we cannot find this either. The only choice is krokodil."

Andrei has already ground up tablets of the codeine-based pain reliever Codasan into a brown powder. He mixes this with Krot and half a litre of petrol in an empty plastic beer bottle. He says he wants to join a programme of taking methadone, but it is too expensive.

While Andrei shakes the bottle, Yuri beckons me over. He has a pile of yellow matchboxes with pictures of zebras. With a razor he is scratching off the side of one, liberating the phosphorus onto a dinner plate. I ask Yuri if he wants to find a job. "There is no work," he says.

He mixes the phosphorus with an alcoholic solution, which he lights up. The flames twist across the dinner plate, leaving a dust stuck to the ceramic, which he scratches off with a razor. Andrei shakes the petrol to separate the pure codeine from the powdered tablets. Inside the bottle, the petrol floats to the top, the codeine to the bottom. He tips this vertical, allowing the heavy mixture to pour into a second, empty coke bottle. With Boris holding the base of the beer bottle, Andrei uses a needle to extract every drop of codeine. He empties this onto a plate on top of a pan of boiling water and rising steam.

"This," says Andrei proudly, "should be desomorphine." The toxic opiate – an intense version of morphine – is a paste stuck to the plate, which Andrei removes in stripes with a razor. He drops the mixture – similar to a blot of red paint – into a small phial. Afterwards, the men combine the desomorphine with iodine and phosphorus into a solution which they melt on the coffee table over a small flame. They share this into three small needles.

I am about to ask Andrei another question, but the men stand up. Their

tracksuit bottoms are open and they are injecting into a vein above the thigh. They put down their needles and slump into the chairs. The mood is sullen. No euphoria. No relaxation.

Later, as we drive through the streets, Giorgi tells me in every block in this area are apartments with krokodil users – injecting up to five times a day. The neighbours complain. The police arrest the users. They spend time in prison. But they return to using.

Badly made krokodil is famous across the ex-Soviet states as a drug that causes oxygen to stop flowing to the body's extremities. If wrongly injected under the skin, this can cause a bruising. Giorgi shows me a large black patch around his anklebone. "It was almost gangrenous," says Giorgi. "I went to hospital. The doctors drained the tissue." Amputations among krokodil users, most commonly a foot or a hand, are common.

Giorgi's clean needle outreach programme reaches around 700 krokodil injectors in Tbilisi. Most are between 20 and 40 years old, but he is seeing more teenagers trying krokodil. What is more, overdoses are increasing.

"In 15 years of using heroin and opium, I have not seen as many cases of overdosing as in one year of using krokodil," says Giorgi. Users are now finding out how lethal the drug is and understandably, most want out. "Ninety per cent are willing to get on methadone treatment. Everyone wants to get rid of it."

Before 2003, Georgia was an embattled and corrupt nation losing control to graft-hungry officials, petty thieves and a heroin epidemic. Following his victory in the Rose Revolution in 2003, incoming President Mikhail Saakashvili re-engineered his country as an Economist readers's paradise – with open borders, low regulations and strong policing.

This led to strong growth, but high unemployment. Meanwhile those deviating from puritan ideals – people such as pickpockets, minor tax dodgers and drug users – were shut up in prison. Under Saakashvili, police swept users off the streets and judges locked them up.

The arms of law and order operated an assembly line of targeting, testing and convicting users and throwing them into forced detox. At the height of this pressure there were queues of accused users outside clinics waiting for their turn to urinate in front of a police officer. Since 2006, around 100,000 have been subject to arrest, detention and forced testing.

The police had quotas of drug users to catch and received incentives to seize as



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many as possible. "There is a joke," says Giorgi, who was picked up over 50 times. "Two policemen in Tbilisi are sitting in a car. One sneezes. Instead of saying 'to your health', the other policeman says 'I hope you catch a lot of junkies'." By 2012, Georgia's prisons were hosting 24,500 inmates – a rate higher than Cuba, Belarus or Russia. Around 3,000 of them were arrested for drug possession or 'drug consumption'.

Now, dealers rarely exist on the street. Heroin is not available. The street trade has to some extent been replaced by DIY drug makers and Big Pharma. Now two-thirds of injecting users in Tbilisi are using krokodil, while the remainder use the stimulant vint – a methamphetamine-like drug made using ephedrine from cold and flu remedies. Cold and flu drug Actifed became the fourth biggest selling drug in Georgia in 2009, possibly boosted by users of vint. Addicts say that now there is only one drug dealer in Georgia – the pharmacies.

Georgia is now experiencing the aftermath of a decade-long war on drug users which it seems no-one is winning fast. In 2009, according to the NGO, Alternative Georgia, there were 40,000 injecting drug users in Georgia. In 2012, there were 45,000 – a 13 per cent rise. "Restriction and fear of imprisonment does not work," says senior researcher at Alternative Georgia Irma Kirtadze.

Georgia's new government has an action plan to combat the rising number of drug users and it shows signs of fresh thinking. "We will keep the severe policy of sanctions under criminal law for traffickers," says Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani, who chairs an interagency

council on drugs. "We are determined to continue communicating with the young generation that using drugs is not something which they can be proud of." She wants to change the prosecution of the users. "We intend not to decriminalize drug use, but to depenalise it," she says, "to reduce sentences for simple users."

NGOs believe a combination of treatment for sufferers and social assistance would reduce drug use. In Georgia around 500 drug users have free access to methadone, while a further 1,500 must pay for the opiate substitute. They argue the best option would be for all methadone to be free.

Giorgi feels he knows where the blame lies. He organized a protest in front of the Russian Embassy, where he berated Russia for its lack of methadone programmes and free syringe distribution – and therefore the source of krokodil.

"We were chanting 'shame Russia!'" he says. "30,000 people died in Russia due to krokodil. We wanted to express our solidarity with the victims."

But he concedes that this demonstration was not against trafficking, dealing or the cultivation or production of drugs. Instead it was a new kind of protest – one that targeted the sharing of cooking skills. "That information on how to use," he says, "comes from Russia."

A longer version of this article appears on www.theblacksea.eu.

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