

# **Barriers to access to HIV testing for adolescents and youth in three EECA countries: Russia, Ukraine and Georgia**

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This Report reflects solely the opinion of representatives of the International Charitable organization “Eurasian Union of Adolescents and Youth “Teenergizer”, which is not the official stance of UNAIDS and ViiV Healthcare

## **Table of Content**

Summary .....	5
Introduction .....	6
About the project.....	9
Analysing access to HIV testing for adolescents by regions.....	11
Russia – Kazan and St. Petersburg.....	11
Ukraine – Kyiv and Poltava.....	12
Georgia – Tbilisi .....	13
Conclusions and recommendations .....	14
Abbreviations .....	15

## Summary

Report “Barriers in access to HIV testing for adolescents and youth in three EECA countries” (hereinafter – Report) describes key barriers in access to HIV testing for adolescents and youth. The cities have been selected by young adults – volunteers of the #QuestHIVtest<sup>1</sup>, implemented by the International charitable organization “Eurasian Union of Adolescents and Youth “Teenergizer” (hereinafter – Teenergizer) with support from the UNAIDS Regional Office in EECA region and ViiV Healthcare.

This Report is not a full-fledged study; it represents opinions of young adults involved in implementing the #QuestHIVtest Project and Teenergizer activities. Following conducted work two main barriers were discovered when it comes to access to HIV testing for adolescents and they are similar for all three countries, namely:

- age limit;
- limited access to free of charge HIV testing.

Apart from barriers mentioned above, there were other country-specific barriers discovered as well, which are described in more detail in this Report.

Based upon obtained results the Teenergizer team defined recommendations to improve access to testing for adolescents and youth in EECA countries:

- Harmonize regulatory legal framework in the field of access to HIV testing for persons under the age of 18 in countries of the region where there are evident non-conformances;
- Jointly with the adolescent community develop or update protocols for HIV testing in a way friendly for adolescents and young adults with further introduction of developed documents throughout all testing centres;
- Jointly with the adolescent community develop feedback mechanisms regarding provision of HIV testing services for adolescents for continuous quality assessment and testing accessibility.

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<sup>1</sup><http://teenergizer.org/category/news/quest-hiv-test/>

## Introduction

Since 2000 there have been 5.7 million new cases of HIV infection registered among adolescents. Based on UNICEF forecast without appropriate measures the number of new cases of HIV infection among adolescents will consistently increase and by 2030 will increase by 13%. Notwithstanding the steps taken by the global community to counter HIV/AIDS epidemic, the AIDS related mortality rate among adolescents has reduced only by 5% since 2010. Global progress in preventing new cases of HIV infection among adolescents and improvement of access to HIV testing and treatment is unacceptably low at the present time.

Continuous spread of HIV infection remains to be a serious problem for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. In 2016 the estimated number and percentage of new HIV infections among adolescents between the age of 15 and 19 in the region amounted to 7 200 and 3% respectively<sup>2</sup>. Estimated data on HIV incidence and spread rate among adolescents and youth in EECA region is presented below<sup>3</sup>:

Age	Prevalence	Incidence
15-24	95 000	26 000
15-19	17 000	7 200
20-24	78 000	19 000

The situation is magnified by the fact that most of adolescents do not have access to antiretroviral therapy. Analysis of UNICEF data<sup>4</sup> clearly shows that without immediate actions the global community will not be able to reach target indicators of 2020 Super-Fast-Track strategy to liquidate transmission of HIV infections in children, reduce the number of new cases of HIV infection in teenage girls and young women and increase the coverage of HIV infection treatment in children and adolescents living with HIV<sup>5</sup>.

Catastrophic situation with HIV/AIDS epidemic in EECA countries among the

<sup>2</sup> <http://childrenandaids.org/statistical-update-page> (см.: Children and AIDS Statistical Update PowerPoint Presentation)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eecaac2018.org/symposium2/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/topic/hivaids/adolescents-young-people/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://free.unaids.org/>

general population and adolescents in particular deeply touched the regional community giving an impulse to the idea of creating an organization for adolescents and youth, who were affected by HIV/AIDS epidemic. The first steps towards this goal were taken in 2010 when ECUO<sup>6</sup> dedicated a separate line of its activity to children and adolescents. Regional group of parents and guardians of HIV-positive children also decided to focus particular efforts on mobilizing the community of adolescents and youth and defending their rights and interests. After two years, in 2012, with the support of the UNICEF Regional Office the adolescent community was implementing its projects in 7 EECA countries, and in 2015 the Eurasian Union of Adolescents and Youth “Teenergizer” and the Union of Adolescents and Youth “Teenergizer” in Ukraine<sup>7</sup> were officially registered.

In November 2017 the First National Forum of Adolescents with International Collaboration<sup>8</sup> was held gathering 34 adolescents affected by HIV/AIDS epidemic, as well as teenagers from key groups from 13 cities of Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Kazakhstan. The main goal of the Forum was to create a unique platform and single driving force of adolescents and young adults to share experience and represent interests of the community at the National level. Within the framework of the Forum the representative of the adolescent community was announced, who for the first time in Ukraine will become a full member of the National Council on TB and HIV / AIDS<sup>9</sup>. The foundation was also established for further communication within this group of adolescents, namely e-mail distribution: [young.leaders@teenergizer.org](mailto:young.leaders@teenergizer.org) and online Platform of young leaders on Facebook<sup>10</sup>. In addition, representatives of the Teenergizer team are now included in the taskforce to develop the National Programme on HIV/AIDS.

Today fellows from Teenergizer represent their interests at key regional, national and international forums; they influence decision making related to HIV, gender issues and other topics essential for youth. In Ukraine young adults from the organization defend their interests by themselves within the framework of financing from the Global Fund. In addition, Teenergizer

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<sup>6</sup> <http://ecuo.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://teenergizer.org/t/ru/about>

<sup>8</sup> <http://teenergizer.org/2017/11/pervyj-natsionalnyj-forum-podrozkov-v-kieve/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://teenergizer.org/2017/11/okonchatelnye-rezultaty-vyborov-predstavitelya-ot-molodezhi-v-natsionalnyj-sovet-po-tuberkulezu-i-vich-spidu/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/youthliderplatform/>

members are represented in organizational and program committees of VI International Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference<sup>11</sup>, thuswise representing interests of many thousands of young adults affected by HIV/AIDS epidemic in EECA countries.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.eecaac2018.org/documents/docs/organising-committee/>



## About the project

Barriers in access to HIV testing for adolescents and youth were studied within the framework of #QuestHIVTest Project (hereinafter – Project), which was implemented by Teenergizer with the support of the UNAIDS Regional Office and ViiV Healthcare in the EECA region in 2017. Project geography covered three countries – Russia, Ukraine and Georgia. In order to implement the project Teenergizer teams were formed integrating 77 volunteer teenagers and 5 coordinators in 5 cities of EECA region: Kyiv and Poltava in Ukraine, St. Petersburg and Kazan in Russia and Tbilisi in Georgia. These teams engaged their peers in voluntary HIV testing.

Five teams of Teenergizer volunteers compiled a list of 126 testing items to be further checked for friendliness to adolescents and also to discover barriers in access to HIV testing for adolescents, 120 of which were checked. Results of checked items were published on T-map<sup>12</sup> website.

Below are the criteria that were the basis for the Teenergizer teams to check the items:

- friendly attitude towards adolescents;
- possibility to do the test without parental agreement;
- convenient location;
- no charge for testing.

In such a way 6 most adolescent-friendly HIV testing centres were identified:

- Kyiv – AHF (5 Shulyavskaya street);
- Kazan – AIDS Prevention and Control Centre (2a Vishnevskogo street);
- Tbilisi – Infectious Diseases, Clinical Immunology and AIDS Centre (16 Kazbegi Avenue);
- Poltava – “Doverie” (*“Trust” – translator’s note*) office as part of Primary Healthcare Centre No. 4 (36 I. Mazepy street, office 301) and Medical centre “100% Zhyzni” (*“100% Life” – translator’s note*) (6d Volodarskogo street);
- St. Petersburg – Drakonia bus (address depends upon location).

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<sup>12</sup><http://map.teenergizer.org/#/map>

Through the Teeneregizer teams' activities more than two thousand young adults did HIV testing. There were also 90 meetings held facilitating mobilization of the adolescent society affected by HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In parallel country coordinators, who helped adolescents implement their activities in three countries, gathered data to assess the situation with access to HIV testing for adolescents in EECA region. On the basis of obtained information two main barriers were designated, which were further checked by the Teeneregizer team fellows:

- age limit;
- limited access to free of charge HIV testing.

In the course of their activities the teams in different cities also encountered other barriers typical for different countries, which are also detailed in this Report.

This Report is not a full-fledged study with application of relevant methodology and tools. The Report reflects opinions of adolescents engaged in implementation of #QuestHIVtest Project and Teeneregizer activities.

## Analysing access to HIV testing for adolescents by regions

### Russia – Kazan and St. Petersburg

#### Age limit

According to the Federal Law No. 323-ФЗ dated 21.11.2011 “On the basics of health care of citizens in the Russian Federation”, article 54 “Rights of adolescents in regards to health care” an adolescent has the right to do an HIV test at the age of 15 without permission from parents or guardians<sup>13</sup>. However according to the data obtained by the Teenergizer team, doctors often refuse to do an HIV test for adolescents under the age of 18 without parents’ presence.

#### Limited access to free of charge HIV testing

Among all health care institutions in Kazan adolescents are given a possibility to do an HIV test free of charge only at the State autonomous health care institution “Republican centre for AIDS and infectious diseases prevention and control of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Tatarstan” or based on a referral from a polyclinic doctor at the place of residence. Teenergizer team discovered no other options for free of charge HIV testing in Kazan. However, it should be noted that if it is necessary to obtain a medical certificate on HIV status (for instance for submission at the place of education or residence), employees of this centre charge 250 RUB (equivalent of 4 USD) for the HIV testing, reasoning their actions with the fact that only anonymous HIV testing is free of charge.

Among health care institutions in St. Petersburg adolescents are given a possibility to do an HIV test free of charge at the St. Petersburg State-funded health care institution “AIDS and infectious diseases prevention and control centre” as well as at other facilities based on the referral from a hospital doctor if the adolescent is undergoing medical treatment at a hospital. If the adolescent is not undergoing medical treatment at a hospital, the cost of HIV testing is 560 RUB (equivalent to 10 USD).

#### Excessive duration and complicacy of the HIV testing process for

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<sup>13</sup><http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/34333/page/10>

## **an adolescent**

In order to do an HIV test outside AIDS prevention and control centres an adolescent needs to go through 4 stages:

1. Set up an appointment with a paediatrician via electronic registration or a special machine at the polyclinic at the place of residence using one's health insurance card;
2. Obtain referral for HIV testing from the paediatrician;
3. Do the HIV test;
4. Come to collect the result.

In total it takes about three weeks from the time an adolescent decides to do an HIV test until obtainment of the test result itself. The process is additionally worsened by long waiting lines at health care facilities in the country, which discourages an adolescent from taking a decision to do an HIV test.

## **Limited access to HIV express-testing**

Teenergizer team from St. Petersburg found only three centres where adolescents can do HIV express-testing, and in Kazan – only two centres.

## **Ukraine – Kyiv and Poltava**

### **Age limit**

Medical workers often refuse to do an HIV test for adolescents under the age of 18 requiring a passport or presence of parents, although Ukrainian legislation envisions HIV testing without presence of parents from the age of 14, as documented in Article 6 of the Law of Ukraine “On countering spread of diseases associated with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and legal and social protection of people living with HIV”<sup>14</sup>. However according to the “Report following analysis of legislative framework to ensure and finance health care and social services for adolescents with HIV in order to preserve SRH”<sup>15</sup> there is a collision in the legislation: according to Article 285 of the Civil Code of Ukraine<sup>16</sup> only persons who reached the age of 18 have the right to obtain results of the HIV test by themselves, although a person can do an HIV test at the age of 14. This fact clearly demonstrates the need for the

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<sup>14</sup><http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1972-12>

<sup>15</sup><http://teenergizer.org/2016/07/otchyotik-teenergizer/>

<sup>16</sup><http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/435-15/page6>

abovementioned contradictory provisions of the law to be brought into compliance.

### **Limited access to free of charge HIV testing**

At some state HIV testing centres the adolescent is charged for the test, although according to Article 6 of the Law of Ukraine “On countering spread of diseases associated with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and legal and social protection of people living with HIV”<sup>17</sup> HIV testing is done free of charge at state institutions.

### **Georgia – Tbilisi**

#### **Limited access to free of charge HIV testing**

In Tbilisi free of charge HIV test can be done only at the AIDS prevention and control centre and some service non-profit organizations; at the rest of city HIV testing centres the test is to be paid for and the cost is around 4 USD.

#### **No access to anonymous testing**

Article 6 of the Law of Georgia “On HIV infection / AIDS”<sup>18</sup> with regards to HIV testing of individual persons identifies anonymous and confidential testing. However, the Law is devoid of details of the process of providing anonymous or confidential testing. In reality official identification documents (passport for instance) are very often required to be presented. Therefore, at all city HIV testing centres in Tbilisi, except for the AIDS prevention and control centre and some service non-profit organizations, HIV testing for adolescents is only confidential but not anonymous.

#### **Absence of good-quality pre- and post-test counselling**

In the course of HIV testing doctors did not provide either pre- or post-test counselling to Teenergizer volunteers, which significantly reduces the level of adolescents’ awareness about existing health risks.

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<sup>17</sup><http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1972-12>

<sup>18</sup><https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/download/90088/1/ru/pdf>

## Conclusions and recommendations

Drawing on the obtained results, two main barriers can be emphasized with regards to access to HIV testing for adolescents, which are similar for all the three countries, namely:

- age limit;
- limited access to free of charge HIV testing.

Apart from specified barriers the following were also identified:

- excessive duration and complicacy of the HIV testing process for an adolescent (Russia);
  - limited access to HIV express-testing (Russia);
  - no access to anonymous testing (Georgia);
  - absence of good-quality pre- and post-test counselling (Georgia).
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- Harmonize regulatory legal framework in the field of access to HIV testing for persons under the age of 18 in countries of the region where there are evident non-conformances;
  - Jointly with the adolescent community develop or update protocols for HIV testing in a way friendly for adolescents and young adults with further introduction of developed documents throughout all testing centres;
  - Jointly with the adolescent community develop feedback mechanisms regarding provision of HIV testing services for adolescents for continuous quality assessment and testing accessibility.

Information about barriers in access to HIV testing for adolescents in countries of the region will serve as the basis for further advocacy activities implemented by the Teenergizer team.

## Abbreviations

<b>HIV</b>	Human immunodeficiency virus
<b>EECA</b>	Eastern Europe and Central Asia
<b>PLHIV</b>	People living with HIV
<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<b>AHF</b>	AIDS Healthcare Foundation
<b>UNAIDS</b>	United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS