



Focusing on

# Adolescents and Youth

in Eastern Europe and Central Asia



# Key Issues of Concern

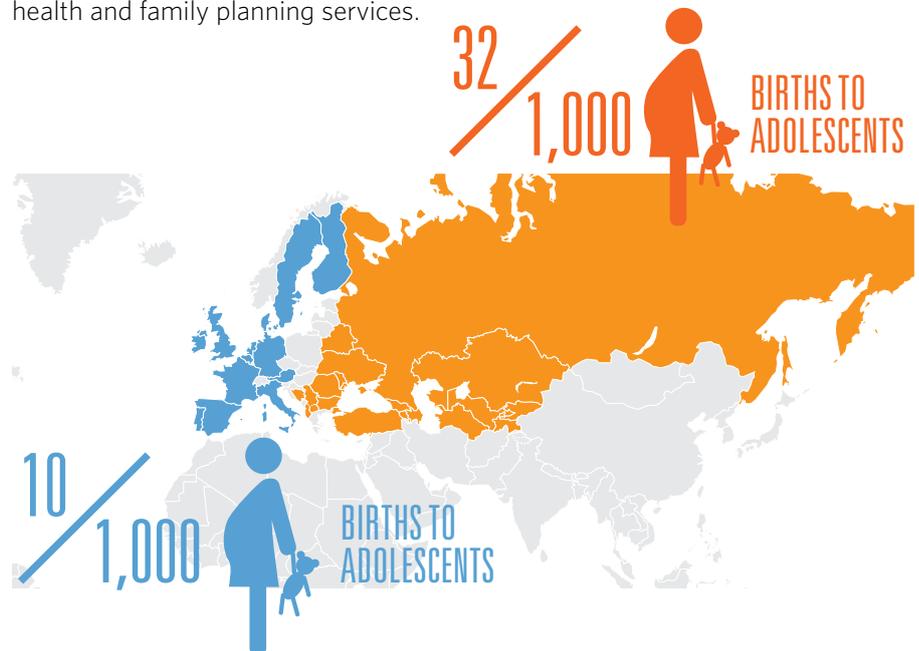
The Eastern Europe and Central Asia region has undergone intensive political, economic, and social transformations over the past decade, opening up new opportunities for people under the age of 25, who make up 22 per cent of the region's population. But the pace and nature of change has also left adolescents (ages 10-19) and youth (ages 15-24) highly vulnerable to poverty; unemployment; health issues, including those related to sexual and reproductive health; and political disenfranchisement. Commitment to the development and promulgation of policies to address the needs of young people (all those ages 10-24) varies widely across the region, with ideological, political, and resource issues all coming into play.

## High levels of youth unemployment and poverty

The youth unemployment rate in the region has grown over the past 10 years and is higher than the jobless rate amongst adults. In Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, youth unemployment stands at more than 40 per cent. Such high levels of joblessness prompt many young people to leave their countries to seek employment, fuelling a 'brain drain' from the region. High rates of unemployment are matched by high rates of poverty. Across the region, more than 22 million young people live on less than 2 USD a day and 5.8 million are undernourished.

## Low levels of sexual and reproductive health

The incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among young people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia is on the rise, and the region has one of the world's fastest-growing HIV epidemics, with the majority of reported infections among young people. Region-wide, 32 of every 1,000 births are among adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19, compared with 10 of every 1,000 births in the older EU member states. Unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions remain common, as do inequities in access to maternal health and family planning services.



## Persistent gender disparities

Early and forced marriage persists in the region, in South-Eastern Europe predominantly among ethnic minorities, and in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey more generally, limiting employment and educational opportunities for girls and exposing them to significant health risks. The region as a whole is characterised by rising illiteracy rates and an overall reduction in school enrolment, especially among girls. Gender-based violence is thought to be widespread and the trafficking of girls and young women remains a problem.

# UNFPA's Work in the Region

Young people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are more connected and empowered than ever before since UNFPA started working in the region in the early 1990s. UNFPA's work on adolescents and youth is focused on realising young people's full potential through five main strategies.

## Promote comprehensive sexuality education

UNFPA supports efforts by countries to deliver comprehensive sexuality education, both in and out of school, with a particular focus on ensuring that curricula meet international standards and on training educators who promote respect for gender equality and the rights of adolescents and youth to have control over matters related to their sexuality, including their sexual and reproductive health. UNFPA works with the established Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER) and utilises innovative tactics – including websites and social media, theatre performances and celebrity spokespeople – to reach young people with quality information and messages about sexual and reproductive health.

- ✔ Improved knowledge of sexual and reproductive health issues among youth in Russia has led to increased use of contraceptive methods, particularly condoms, which 59 per cent of sexually active women aged 15 to 24 now say they or their partner use for dual protection against pregnancy and HIV infection.



## Improve access to sexual and reproductive health services

UNFPA assists policy-makers, service administrators, and providers in improving their outreach to young people, and in strengthening their sexual and reproductive health services so that they are available, accessible, and affordable for young people. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNFPA has focused its efforts on strengthening the capacity of service providers to deliver integrated sexual and reproductive health/HIV services to young key populations at higher risk of HIV/STI exposure.

- ✔ Increasing adolescents' access to contraception in Ukraine, where UNFPA is working with the Ministry of Health to develop a comprehensive regulatory and institutional framework for youth-friendly health services, has reduced abortions by two-thirds.

## Promote youth leadership and participation

Through its funding and technical support, UNFPA helps create opportunities for young people to train and act as leaders or as advocates on decisions that will affect their lives. In Kyrgyzstan, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Moldova, for example, UNFPA has successfully worked to get young people involved in developing national policies and laws on youth through forums, conferences, and public debates. It also helped bring parliamentarians from all five Central Asian countries together with young activists to discuss youth policies in the region.

- ✔ Members of the UNFPA-initiated youth network Y-PEER in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia took an active role in revoking the adoption by parliament of a new youth law until it was properly discussed with the participation of young people.

## Make better data on youth available

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, age-disaggregated data and rigorous evaluations of the impact of youth policies and programmes are often not available. UNFPA compiles and analyses (and assists countries in generating and analysing) population and development data that can be used to support and advocate for effective policies, programmes, and investments.

- ✓ The results of UNFPA's 'Analysis of the Youth Employment Situation' in Armenia were taken into account in the development of a new Employment Law which entered into force in 2014.

## Reach out to marginalised adolescents and youth

Young women and girls are commonly at the highest risk of poor sexual and reproductive health, violence, and exploitation, including through sex work and early marriage. In Kyrgyzstan, UNFPA has contributed to the prevention of HIV among sex workers. In South-Eastern Europe, the agency has successfully worked to help raise awareness about child marriage and early pregnancies among Roma communities.

- ✓ The elimination of child marriage was included in Kyrgyzstan's 2013–2017 development strategy following UNFPA's 'Too Young to Wed' campaign in 2012.



# Priorities for the Future

- Further reduce the region's adolescent pregnancy rate, which is declining overall but remains high in some countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as among Roma populations.
- Extend the reach of peer-education initiatives to better serve rural youth and other marginalised groups of young people, including adolescent girls at risk of child marriage.
- Close gaps in comprehensive sexuality education in schools and reform programmes that too often perpetuate cultural biases and stereotypes rather than promoting human rights and gender equality.
- Increase the spread of affordable, accessible, and confidential sexual and reproductive health services that are sensitive to young people's needs and offer a broad range of contraceptive options.
- Encourage governments in the region to make increased cross-sectoral investments in young people's health, education, and employment.
- Promote the participation of young people in decisions on policies and programmes that affect them.

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