Mitigating the Dangers of Dog Attacks in Eastern Europe

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Summary

Security is more than guards, gates, and guns. Protecting people, facilities, and operations requires attention to threats that might seem mundane or insignificant, including basic health, safety, and environmental risks. In Bulgaria and throughout Eastern Europe, aggressive stray dogs pose a health and safety risk to U.S. private sector organizations.

Bulgaria’s Strays

On April 8, 2012, 87-year old retired Bulgarian-American professor, Botyo Tachkov, died of injuries sustained in a dog attack. Just 10 days earlier, a pack of 15-20 dogs mauled him in the Malinova Dolina neighborhood of Sofia, Bulgaria. Some of the bites reached the bone. Tachkov underwent a series of ultimately unsuccessful surgeries. The next day, an 18-year old woman was attacked by a different pack of stray dogs in downtown Sofia, but did not sustain any serious injuries. In June, an 88-year old man was attacked by a pack of 25 stray dogs in a park east of downtown Sofia. He suffered multiple, severe bite wounds on his arms and legs, and died four days later.

According to official estimates, Sofia is home to 10,000 stray dogs, responsible for more than 400 reported dog bites each year. U.S. private sector organizations in Bulgaria report that they view stray dogs as a threat to staff and note an increase in aggressive stray dogs in recent years. The problem is the most acute in Sofia; organizations operating in other Bulgarian cities observe small dog populations and less aggressive behavior. By contrast to Sofia, Plovdiv, Bulgaria’s second-largest city, has a stray dog population of only 700.

In response to the increasing presence of stray dogs in Sofia, the government is using neutering to control the dog population and is constructing shelters for the animals. However, the control measures have not yet kept up with the number of strays on Sofia’s streets. In 2011, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandukova promised to reduce the stray dog population by half in two years and by 95 percent in four years. Her plan includes fines for those caught feeding strays. As of 2013, the shelter space available remains inadequate, and despite the ongoing efforts, OSAC constituents in Sofia report no noticeable change in the stray population, consistent with official reports that the population has increased or remained constant in recent years. One factor contributing to this trend is European Union-wide regulation governing the methods of animal control, which prohibit or discourage techniques previously used in Bulgaria.

European Legal Efforts

In 2008-2009, the Animal Protection Act, an EU regulation, was enacted with the intention to protect animals from inhumane treatment and to reduce the population of strays. The Act calls for those abandoning pets to be penalized, and it limits the options available to municipalities for animal control. This has meant that certain measures previously used to reduce the stray dog
population are now not permissible. Specifically, municipalities are to house strays in shelters, neuter and vaccinate them, or return to the street. Euthanasia is not permitted as a means of controlling the population; only sick or aggressive animals can be euthanized. This presents a problem for governments that had few animal shelters and used euthanasia as the primary method of population control. Virtually overnight, the ability of local governments to take effective action to control the stray population was removed. Several years after the Animal Protection Act, citizens and politicians across Southeastern Europe decry what they see as a lack of implementation of the methods for animal population control. For example, in Greece, despite a law requiring the humane catching, treating, neutering, and releasing of dogs, there is no capacity in or money for the shelters. Compounding the lack of resources was the simultaneous economic hardship that increased the stray population. People forced to move to find work or unable to carry the expense of a pet abandoned dogs in much higher than normal numbers.

A Regional Problem

Aggressive stray dogs are not a problem unique to Bulgaria. In 2007, Ukraine reported euthanizing 500,000 stray dogs per year and Poland at least 75,000 nationwide. The European side of Istanbul is home to 56,000 stray dogs, according to 2006 estimates. Romanian media reports that 300 people are bitten by stray dogs every day, and in 2008 there were an estimated 50,000-100,000 strays in Bucharest alone. According to a 2007 report, Albania, Armenia, Moldova, and Serbia also reported increasing populations. Only a handful of countries in Europe were able to estimate the number of strays. In many countries, it is customary to allow a pet dog to roam the streets freely, even in urban settings, and many dogs are cared for by a community. The stray population, due to these customs and inadequate population control, is most noticeable in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where efforts to control the dog population have been relatively unsuccessful.

Strays Worldwide

The burgeoning population of stray dogs might be the most acute in Europe, but stray dogs are not a risk unique to Europe. The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WPSA) estimates that there are 20.7 million stray dogs worldwide. Across the globe, injury and disease connected to stray dogs poses a serious risk. There are few studies on the stray animal population, and data is scarce. Several countries have recently experienced problems with stray dog attacks:

- Mexico: Mexico City is home to an estimated 120,000 stray dogs, an estimate revised from the three million reported in a 2008 study. On January 8, 2013, a pack of 25 stray dogs is believed to have mauled four people to death in a park in eastern Mexico City. The bodies were discovered with numerous bite marks and their belongings a short distance away.

- Morocco: In early January 2013, a law was passed aimed at limiting the number of dangerous dogs in the country, which experiences a reported 50,000 dog bites per year. The impetus behind the law was an increasing number of human deaths from rabies.

- India: The country experiences the greatest number of human deaths from rabies per year, approximately 20,000. In May 2012, a British tourist died from rabies after being bitten by an infected dog.

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Health Concerns

It is inadvisable to approach any stray dog, regardless of the aggression it displays. Dog attacks can be unprovoked or linked to disease. Rabies is one possible source of a stray dog’s aggression, and is transmitted by saliva, even without a bite. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a dog lick or scratch on damaged human skin can transmit the disease, so even a friendly encounter with a stray dog poses a risk. Washing an exposed area immediately after the incident and immunization as soon as possible (within hours) after the possible infection can prevent the transmission of the disease. Quick treatment is essential in non-immunized humans, since rabies is nearly 100 percent fatal in humans once symptoms manifest. The WHO estimates that more than 15 million people receive post-bite treatment each year. More than 55,000 people die from rabies worldwide, with 95% of these deaths in Asia and Africa. The vaccine is relatively inexpensive, but it requires 3 doses over 3 weeks. This, however, is much more convenient than seeking treatment after a dog bite. Post-bite vaccinations are difficult to find and often very expensive.

The Centers for Disease Control recommend rabies vaccinations for anyone with high occupational risks, such as veterinarians; those engaging in activities that might bring them into direct contact with bats, carnivores, and other mammals; and adventure travelers. In addition, a rabies vaccination is recommended for long-term travelers and expatriates living in areas with a high risk of exposure in: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey, and Ukraine. In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkey, even those spending a lot of time outdoors, especially in rural areas, or involved in activities such as bicycling, camping, or hiking are recommended to get a rabies vaccine.

Mitigation and Countermeasures

Perimeter walls with limited gates are a good countermeasure to aggressive stray dogs, but this is sometimes not an option for location or access reasons. OSAC constituents in Bulgaria report using a variety of measures, including 24-hour security and busing personnel to and from work sites to avoid stray dog packs’ territories. Constituent organizations also reported carrying out awareness campaigns, which educate staff on preventing dog attacks. This advice includes avoiding stray dogs, but if the areas in which dogs live cannot be avoided, constituents recommend their personnel carry dog deterrents, such as sprays, ultrasound-emitting devices, or a large stick. Pepper spray is not effective on dogs; it relies on pores in human skin to induce a burning sensation. However, dog-specific deterrent sprays are available. Ultrasound devices make a high-pitched noise that dogs can hear but humans cannot. Finally, U.S. private sector organizations in Sofia can call a municipally-contracted company, “Eco Balance” (Ekoravnovesie), to request the removal of aggressive or problematic strays. Organizations in other cities should contact their local government or animal welfare organizations for assistance.

For Further Information

Please direct any questions regarding this report or the general security situation in Europe to OSAC’s Regional Analyst for Europe and Eurasia.