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Developing an Effective Alcohol Policy for Russia

Russia is undergoing a demographic crisis with death rates exceeding birth rates by 900,000 a year. “The Russian population will shrink to 128.9 million people from today’s 140 million or so, even if 250,000 immigrants move to Russia annually in the period 2013–2026”, predicts the Head of the New Economic School, Sergey Gurev, in an interview with Barent’s Observer. Increased immigration has been the main solution discussed, despite the fact that a major factor in the abnormally high mortality of northern Post-Soviet countries is related to the use of alcohol. Direct and indirect alcohol related mortality is estimated to account for around 500,000 deaths annually in Russia alone. The thought that effective alcohol policy measures could extend life expectancy encouraged a group of Russian experts on alcohol mortality and policy to establish academic activities on the subject. “The aim is not only to discuss alcohol related mortality, but also to suggest ways of overcoming the problems”, writes one of the group’s initiators, Daria Khaltourina, in a presentation for the seminar “Developing an Effective Alcohol Policy for Russia: International Experience and the Russian Realities”, held in Moscow at the beginning of March¹.

Officially, alcohol consumption in Russia lies at around 10 litres per person, but actual, total consumption is estimated at around 14–15 litres, including widespread consumption of illegal spirits such as home brewed spirits or ethanol products, which have been developed for other – often pharmacological – use, making overall consumption difficult to estimate. Nikolay Gerasimenko, head of the

Organizing Committee and Vice Chair of the Health Care Committee of the Russian Parliament, opened the seminar by referring to a consumption structure recognised as being typical of Russia; 90 per cent of consumed alcohol consists of vodka and beer. Vodka represents at least 60 per cent of consumption (WHO estimation: 75%) as the cheapest alternative in terms of the price/strength ratio; for the price of a bottle of vodka, which is around three dollars, one can only purchase three bottles of beer. Alcohol consumption is highest among men and common among young people. Some 80 per cent of young people aged between 11 and 24 consume alcohol. According to Gerasimenko, priority number one should be developing an effective alcohol policy, “Nordic experiences are valuable in this process”, he declared to the seminar’s Nordic participants. Another introductory speaker, Igor Bartsyts, a representative of the Russian Academy for Civil Service Administration, stressed that there is a need to investigate the prevailing social structure in order to explore ways of, and mechanisms for, pondering and acting in order to promote healthy lifestyle choices.

Evgeniy Roizman, a Russian State Duma deputy, and a co-founder and ex-president of the City Without Drugs Fund (Gorod Bez Narkotikov) referred to the positive outcome of the Fund’s work. In 2005, a group of young people approached Roizman with their concerns about the trade in counterfeit vodka. Since then, the foundation has campaigned successfully against surrogate alcohol in the City of Yekaterinburg. Roizman spoke of how the foundation has been working alongside the police in closing outlets that sell illegal alcohol. He emphasised that dealing with pharmacy products (antiseptics etc.) consumed as alcohol surrogates would also be important.

Anatoliy Vishnevskiy, Director of the Institute of Demography at the State University “Higher School of Economics”, spoke of demographic developments and the causes of premature mortality. Vishnevskiy emphasised that not only is consumption too high,

but there is a need for changes in consumption patterns. Robin Room, from the Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Melbourne University, gave a comprehensive presentation on various alcohol policy challenges and pointed out the big differences between European regions in their proportions of abstainers. Italy and Russia served as contrasting examples – the former being a region where almost nobody aimed to get drunk, while the latter is a region in which almost all drinking involves drunkenness. Room stressed the importance of understanding the cultural and historical context of drinking habits. Positive valuations linked to sociability, nutrition and “time out” are often related to alcohol use. “There is a wide range of symbolism associated with alcohol, drinking and abstaining”, Room stated and presented various meanings given to drinking and intoxication such as adult status, rebellion, personal autonomy etc., whereas restrained drinking is considered a symbol of self-control. Great Britain and the Nordic countries stand in the ‘long shadow’ cast by the history of temperance. Similarly, the former Soviet Union remains in the shadow of the 1985–88 alcohol reform².

Martin McKee of London University, an expert on challenges to health and health systems in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, pointed out that in discussions of the demographic crisis much attention had been paid to the low birth rate, although high premature mortality rates amongst the Russian population constitutes a problem of equal magnitude. If developments continue along the same trajectory, the Russian Federation will become smaller in population than countries such as Uganda, Mexico or Ethiopia by the year 2050, stated McKee. The average male youth in Great Britain has a 90 per cent chance of reaching retirement age, while Russian boys have only a 50 per cent chance. McKee pondered the broader effects of ill health on the Russian economy and reminded the audience that ill people are less likely to remain in work, that they retire early and they are

unlikely to invest in education. McKee believes there is an urgent need to develop an integrated multisectoral policy strategy for Russia, to strengthen the public health system, clearly define the role of various actors, increase training in modern public health and strengthen surveillance systems, especially with respect to non-fatal diseases. McKee explains, “Although Russia monitors its demographics closely, it pays to little attention to the surveillance of non-fatal diseases.”

A concerted effort was made by the participants to pursue the main purpose of the seminars, i.e. to discuss policy options for Russia. Sven Andreasson from the Swedish National Institute of Public Health speculated on Russia’s alcohol policy options and outlined five effective policies in reducing alcohol problems at the level of the general population: reducing the physical and economic availability of alcohol, drink-driving deterrence, brief advice in health care, parental programmes and responsible beverage services. Andreasson also pointed out the importance of prevention programmes and actions at local level, and mentioned the media’s role in shaping public opinion. Esa Österberg of the Finnish National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) presented Nordic experiences that could be of use when discussing alcohol policy strategies. He presented various control measures and their effects and concluded by stating that price increases and stricter control of the physical availability of alcohol beverages are proven to be the most effective measures.

A member of the audience enquired about Andreasson’s and Österberg’s thoughts on education as a policy tool. The researchers answered that information and education should perhaps not be considered effective tools in their own right, but rather serve as complementary to other inputs contributing towards the formation of general attitudes. Daria Khaltouina asked for brief advice on action to be taken in Russia. Österberg stressed that this was particularly difficult,

since no one could predict how different societies would react to different measures. When asked to choose three tools, Österberg settled for the following: excise duties, which he described as a “sure tool”; age limits, which he referred to as being especially effective with respect to young people’s behaviour and, finally, drink driving checks. “These three measures make a good start”, Österberg concluded.

In her presentation, Daria Khaltourina of the Anti-Crisis Management and Social System Organization Dept. of the Russian Academy for Civil Service Administration, summarised Russia’s point of departure: “Alcohol is known to be an enormously destructive factor in Russia’s demographic development and the related mortality rate is a major cause of the demographic crisis”, said Khaltourina, who did not hesitate to refer to the alcohol situation as a humanitarian catastrophe. Khaltourina presented graphs implying a very strong correlation between alcohol consumption and life expectancy for males and to a lesser extent for females. Average life expectancy in Russia is below sixty years for males, being 14 years higher for females. Once again, binge drinking patterns were a major concern: “The spirits to beer cost ratio is of great importance when trying to affect the drinking habits of Northern European populations”, stated Khaltourina, who went on to speculate on whether alcohol policy measures recognised as being effective elsewhere could also be successful in Russia. After presenting data on alcohol-related harm and consequences, she concluded by asking whether the experiences of the Nordic countries might be useful in developing an alcohol policy for Russia. Again, the non-Russians were careful when responding and seemed more preoccupied with the statement that beer drinking is not as harmful as drinking vodka. The type of alcohol does not matter, it is mainly the total consumption that counts, said Andreasson, but Khaltourina found it easy to dispute this point by referring to the exceptionally high proportion of vodka in Russian total consumption and

by citing examples of experiences from the Baltic States and Poland. A Russian member of the audience claimed that one cannot become intoxicated from drinking beer. Once again, the complex nature of the field of alcohol policy was apparent to the participants, recalling Robin Room’s earlier notes on the cultural and historical context.

In the following session, Vladimir Shkolnikov of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and Alexander Nemtsov of the Moscow Scientific Research Institute each presented data on alcohol mortality in Russia. Shkolnikov emphasised the importance of analysing mortality data and displayed differences between graphs for different countries. Due to the strong negative trends in the Russian data, the corresponding graphs for Western Europe would not even fit into the same diagram, said Shkolnikov. Nemtsov spoke of alcohol mortality as an indicator of the alcohol situation. “Not all trends can be explained by alcohol use, but alcohol consumption is somewhat easier to estimate than, for example, effects due to general poverty levels”, Nemtsov explained. According to Nemtsov, the most important thing to emphasise was that Russia’s actual level of alcohol consumption was unknown. “Without data on actual consumption, we have no starting point”, he stressed.

Swedish researchers Mats Ramstedt and Jonas Landberg from the Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs at Stockholm University (SoRAD), have examined the extent to which population drinking is related to various forms of alcohol-related mortality in Eastern Europe and how it compares with Western Europe. Ramstedt referred to the findings of the ECAS study showing that an increase in population drinking increases various forms of alcohol-related mortality, which naturally supports the total consumption model. How, then, does the total consumption model work for Eastern Europe? “Changes in population drinking have shown a stronger effect on mortality per extra litre per capita in Northern Europe compared to Central and Southern Europe”,

explained Ramstedt. The results of his and Landberg's study demonstrate a positive relationship between changes in total consumption and various forms of alcohol-related mortality in men. The effects of alcohol on males were generally stronger than in Central and Southern Europe. However, only Russia consistently displayed effects equal to or stronger than those of Northern Europe. Overall, the findings support the notion that the total consumption model is indeed applicable in Eastern Europe and show that Eastern European countries would avoid a substantial number of alcohol-related deaths if per capita alcohol consumption decreased, particularly among men.

The second day of the seminar was opened by Øyvind Horverak of the Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research (SIRUS), who presented an overview of historical developments in Norway and explained how various developments and incidents had made their mark on drinking patterns and consumption trends. This session complemented the previous day's afternoon session on alcohol mortality data demonstrating that, without proper background knowledge on a society to serve as a frame of reference, data on e.g. consumption, harm or mortality can only account for limited aspects of the actual overall picture. At the end of his presentation, Horverak emphasised that one of the lessons to be learned from the Norwegian development is that harvesting public opinion is of major importance; political interventions must seem reasonable and rational in the eyes of the public.

David Leon of London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University of London gave a presentation on surrogate alcohol consumption in Russia, defined as "drinking manufactured substances not intended for consumption", such as cologne or antiseptics. Leon pointed out that there are very few studies on this topic although it is a widespread phenomenon in Russia. His own material, which is based on questionnaire interviews with people who have lived with surrogate users, shows what a perilous cus-

tom surrogate drinking is; the likelihood of suffering an early death increases immensely on each consumption occasion. The probability of early death is four times higher with 1–3 monthly drinking events compared to abstaining from surrogates, and increases radically for each occasion adding up to a 39 times greater probability when consuming surrogates on a daily basis. The fact that surrogate consumption is much cheaper than vodka and that it is hard to break the habit once you have started makes tackling the problem especially difficult. Leon stressed that the material does not provide answers to the question of whether only the most marginalized groups drink surrogates, since the interview material excluded people who live alone and those supposed to be the most marginalised, i.e. homeless people.

A comparison of the toxicity of illegal alcohol and public health effects was conducted by Vladimir Nuzhnyj of the Narcological Research Centre of the Federal Agency of Health Care and Social Development of Russia. Nuzhnyj began by explaining different terms and definitions of counterfeit alcohol; illegal production; poor-quality, bad quality or non-standard alcoholic production; substitutes; true and false substitutes for alcohol; moonshine etc. The use of spirits containing liquids with denaturizing additives cannot in itself represent a major reason for the high level of fatal alcoholic poisonings, explained Nuzhnyj, but stressed that regular use of these kinds of substitutes can cause the accelerated formation of some somatic diseases, including liver failure. One of the conclusions presented in Nuzhnyj's power point text was that substituting vodka with beer would reduce sudden death rates: "Changing the structure of consumed alcohol in favour of beer may considerably reduce rates of sudden death due to alcohol abuse, since alcoholic poisoning through the consumption of beer is unlikely (a fatal concentration of alcohol in an organism can occur due to the forced consumption of beer only in quantities of 10 litres or more)." By this stage of the conference, nobody was pre-

pared to raise strong objections to this declaration.

Evgeniy Malenkin of the NGO, "Sober City," gave a presentation on the third sector's influence in the region of Yekaterinburg. Malenkin gave accounts of how the organisation has been acting on a local level to tackle surrogates and activating the public to keep their eyes open and report illegal sales. Within three months after the campaign began in 2005, a hundred sale points had already been shut down. The work of the organisation involves investigating the routes through which illegal spirits reach the markets, which is sometimes rather complicated due to corruption and bribes.

If the words of wisdom of the seminar's first day comprised the statement on the importance of acknowledging the cultural context, the rhetorical highlight of the second day lay in the demonstration by Finnish researcher, Marja Holmila of STAKES, that the evidence behind what are customarily known as "well functioning alcohol policy tools" is built up by systematic research at local level. Holmila cited the example of how, through trial and error, the Finnish PAKKA project is creating an evidence base using responsible hostess methods in two Finnish cities.

The seminar's final session discussed modern alcohol policy and was chaired by Norwegian researcher, Sturla Nordlund (from SIRUS), who not only gave an excellent overview in scientific terms, based on empirical research and exploring the future perspectives of Nordic alcohol policy, but also managed to both chair and participate in a lively follow-up discussion by flitting admirably between the podium and the interpretation device. The session began with a presentation by Igor Ponkin of the Russian Academy for Civil Service Administration, who wanted to focus on young people as a special social group of alcohol consumers. "Every second Russian street child uses alcohol", stated Ponkin, who believed that there had been too much focus on the total consumption model. Following Ponkin's and Nordlund's presentations, Andrey Ko-

rotayev from the Center for Civilizational and Regional Studies of the Russian Academy of Science wound up the seminar's final session by identifying distilled spirits as the major threat to Russia's development, alongside strategies for creating a decline in alcohol consumption. He spoke of Russia's social epidemic of alcoholism and suggested a strategy including increasing taxes, decreasing the number of outlets, prohibiting the sale of spirits during the night – all of the above in addition to a strong campaign against alcohol surrogates and moonshine products.

In sum, the organisers are to be congratulated on their dynamic and exciting seminar based on a well-combined range of scientific presentations meeting a high standard. The only downside was the fact that so many missed out on it.

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NOTES

- 1) The seminar "Developing an Effective Alcohol Policy for Russia (International Experience and the Russian Realities)" was held in the Russian Academy for Civil Service Administration, hosted by the President of the Russian Federation (RACS), in March 1–2, 2007. Organisers included the Health Protection Committee of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, the Department of Social System Organisation and Anti-Crisis Management of RACS, the Centre for Civilizational and Regional Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Demography of the Higher School for Economy (State University), the Open Institute of Health and the "Narkologia" journal.
The seminar – particularly Nordic participation – was supported by the Nordic Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research (NAD).
- 2) **The alcohol reform by the then Soviet premier** Mikhail Gorbachev was designed to combat widespread alcoholism in the Soviet Union. The prices of vodka, wine and beer were raised, and their sales were restricted. People

who were caught drunk at work or in public were prosecuted. Drinking on long-distance trains and in public places was banned and many wineries were shut down. Scenes including alcohol consumption were cut from the movies. The reform resulted in a decline in the state budget after alcohol production shifted to the black market economy. However, it has been claimed that, after Gorbachev drastically curtailed alcohol production in 1984, the average male lifespan shot up by 3.5 years, to 65.

The International Society for the Study of Drug Policy

March 22–23, 2007 the Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research, SIRUS, with support from the Nordic Council for Alcohol and Drug Research, hosted the first meeting of the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy, ISSDP, in Oslo. The meeting gathered 80 participants from 21 countries, representing a wide variety of disciplines to study "consequences and choices of policy on illegal drugs", as Peter Reuter phrased it in his introductory remarks.

The 25 or so papers presented at the meeting focused on numerous topics: the economic aspects of drug use and drug control, estimations of the size of drug markets, recent drug policy trends, the causal conceptions behind policy measures, policy evaluation studies, the measurement of drug related harms and public costs, and discussions of crucial concepts, such as harm reduction and healthisation of social problems. The forthcoming volume "Drugs and Public Policy" – modelled on the volume "Alcohol – No Ordinary Commodity" – was presented by a group of authors, including Ingeborg Ros-

sow, Keith Humphreys, Jonathan Caulkins and Thomas Babor.

Most of the meeting's participants were researchers, but there were also attendees who represented interest groups or state and international authorities, such as EMCDDA and UNODC (the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). The UK, US and Nordic countries in particular were strongly represented, but there were also several participants from Eastern Europe and France.

Even if some of the initiators behind the meeting have been regarded as representing a "liberal" view, the actual fact of this meeting and the establishment of the new society can be seen as a sign of a new gathering in the middle in the drug policy debate. The "war on drugs" standpoint is today softened and/or marginalised and those advocating harm reduction are starting to discuss in terms of actual, functioning versions of that very general concept. On a European level the widening focus of the activities of EMCDDA in Lisbon has also established drug use and drug problems as something that definitely cannot be mastered with policing only and is 'here to stay' in the social policy and health field. The position of the drug question, as a moving object in the overlapping zones of public health and social services, treatment and law and order, illegal international trade and enforcement makes it a fascinating subject of research. It is no coincidence that the majority of the participants were men, with many of the papers dealing with markets and policing.

The visible participation of activist researchers or researching activists, combined with a sense of momentum for building better drug policies gave a certain energy to the meeting.

During the meeting the society was officially established, modelling its by-laws on the Kettil Bruun Society. The objectives of the society will be "to promote research on the problems arising from the use and distribution of illegal drugs, to strengthen relations among analysts concerned with these matters and to foster a comparative under-