

The Issue of Narcomania in Russia

National Security vs. Civil Society?

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The complex of issues related to the illicit production, distribution, and consumption of drugs is one of the most serious challenges for Russia. The scale of this challenge is comparable to other neglected problems, such as high mortality resulting from alcoholism, poor medical care, and traffic accidents. The number of drug addicts, however, appears to be increasing at a faster and steadier pace than the number of victims of comparable maladies. And while the importance of the drug problem in Russia is clear, the strategy to solve it is not. The key element of such a strategy should focus either on increasing the power of security and police forces or on developing civil society mechanisms to reduce drug demand.

The Security Approach

The security approach to the drug problem in Russia is supported by many high-ranking officials and representatives of the pro-governmental mass media. Their position is that the problem ought to be solved mainly by such state agencies as the Federal Security Service (FSB), the State Committee for the Control over Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (*Gosnarkokontrol*), the Customs Service, and divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In this view, these governmental bodies should be provided with additional financing and extraordinary powers, even at the

expense of human rights. In their view, human rights are of secondary importance to the defense of national security.

The security approach to Russia's drug problem is usually justified by reference to the severity of the situation, even if many of the expert assessments that are invoked are not sufficiently grounded. Within one year, for instance, estimates of the number of Russian drug addicts cited by representatives of various state bodies increased from 2 million (General Prosecutor Vladimir Ustinov in November 2004) to 4 million (Minister of Internal Affairs Rashid Nurgaliyev in December 2004) and finally to 6 million (the Ministry of Health Care and Social Development in July 2005). Estimates of the situation by regional officials are equally unreliable: officials often manipulate figures in order to either dramatize the situation and obtain additional resources or to prove the success of their anti-drug work. In determining the approximate number of drug addicts in a province, some officials may multiply the number of registered drug addicts by ten; others, only by three.

The perception that the drug situation is dire is often combined with anti-democratic, xenophobic, and anti-Western attitudes. The image that proponents of the security approach typically use is one of a war Russia is conducting against an impersonal drug mafia (*narcomafia*) supported by clandestine forces. An entire vocabulary derives from this image, emphasizing the acute danger of the drug problem with such awkward neologisms like *narco-aggression*, *narco-expansion*, and *narco-situation*. Some writers cite the drug problem as evidence that liberalism is more of an evil for Russia than a strict authoritarian or even totalitarian system.

A striking example of this perception is the journal *Narkomat*, the title of which is a pun on the name of the People's Commissariat, the Bolsheviks' executive authority. While this periodical is nominally independent, its subtitle notes that it is the "journal of combat operations of the Russian *Gosnarkokontrol*." The head of *Gosnarkokontrol*, Viktor Cherkesov, deputy head Aleksander Mikhailov, Chairman of the Audit Chamber (and former prime minister) Sergei Stepashin, and other well-known Russian executives and politicians are members of the editorial board. About half the journal's materials are interviews with officials dealing with the drug issue. In its articles, readers discover that drugs are a new Western method of clandestine war against Russia and that some ethnic groups (especially Tajiks, Gypsies, Azeris, and Chechens) specialize in drug trafficking. Another example of this sort is the public foundation "City without Narcotics," based in Yekaterinburg and supported by local authorities, but active far beyond city bounds. The website of this organization contains a section on "evildoers" with subsections on "Tajiks," "Gypsies," and others. Such examples illustrate the atmosphere created by some organizations close to official structures as well as members of the mass media.

Hardliners propose concrete measures: closure of Russian borders with Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan; introduction of a visa regime for citizens of all countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); strict control over ethnic migrants and certain ethnic groups in Russia; and imposition of the death penalty for drug traffickers. It seems doubtful, however, that these measures in and of themselves would have the desired effect. Most illicit drugs are brought into Russia through existing border checkpoints; the structure of drug trafficking is pluralistic and multi-segmented; and one ethnically-based criminal group can be replaced by another. The death penalty has not helped China, Iran, Pakistan, and other states combat drug addiction. Moreover, it can hinder Russian cooperation with the European Union and put in jeopardy the lives of innocent citizens forced to deal with malefactors in the police system.

Hardliners also have a very hostile attitude towards measures to liberalize Russia's anti-drug policy. Advocates of cannabis legalization or the use of certain narcotic substances like ketamine for veterinary purposes are often portrayed as accomplices of the drug mafia; so are organizations that distribute disposable syringes and condoms or which support the use of methadone for drug addicts. For similar reasons, some supporters of the security approach also harshly criticized a 2004 governmental decree decriminalizing personal possession of up to one gram of heroin and two grams of marijuana. The decision was meant to remove ordinary drug users, who in 2002 officially accounted for about 60 percent of criminal cases, from the focus of law enforcement efforts.

A main weakness of the security approach is its reliance on security and police agencies that suffer from excessive administrative machinery and armies of low-paid and poorly-equipped anti-drug personnel. In May 2004, Russian President Vladimir Putin conceded that about 40,000 personnel are directly involved in anti-drug operations, while in the United States the corresponding number is about 10,000. In 2004, it was also revealed that in the regional branches of some border guard services up to 80 percent of financial resources and staff were concentrated in the managing departments. These structures are very vulnerable to corruption, and bribes can be hundreds of times greater than salaries. Well-organized criminal operations may require only the passivity of a corrupt official in order to operate freely. Such corruption is very difficult to discover, making the scale of drug-related corruption difficult to assess.

The Demand Reduction Approach

The main alternative to the security approach is a demand reduction strategy that includes health protection, youth policy, social advertising, and other social measures. This approach assumes the active involvement of nongovernmental organizations: anti-narcotic foundations, sports clubs, and religious organizations. The psychological basis of demand reduction

involves the diversion of young people from drugs or the creation of powerful stimuli to overcome drug addiction. Not only have traditional religious organizations achieved good results in the rehabilitation of drug addicts, but so have organizations officially labeled as destructive cults or totalitarian sects (Jehovah's Witnesses and scientologists, for example). If the drug situation in Russia is portrayed as a national security threat by Russian nationalists and others, these cults and sects ironically end up serving as allies, not enemies.

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of many officially supported anti-drug programs is low. They frequently take the form of Soviet-style agitation conducted by unqualified bureaucrats. Often, such agitation only provokes more interest in drugs among teenagers. Even effective demand reduction measures are usually underfinanced. In Orenburg oblast, for example, they were funded at only 12 percent of identified needs for 2003 and at 6 percent in the first half of 2004.

In September 2005, a new federal program entitled "Complex Measures to Counteract Drug Abuse and their Illicit Circulation" was adopted. This program may be regarded as a shift toward a demand reduction strategy. The program ambitiously aims to diminish the number of drug addicts in Russia by 20 percent, although it only plans to increase the ratio of confiscated drugs to illicit circulation from 8.9 percent to 10.7 percent. The program's \$108 million budget is to be distributed primarily to *Gosnarkokontrol* (41 percent) and the Ministry of Health and Social Development (12 percent), although several other agencies will also receive a share. After 2006, the greater share of funds allocated to *Gosnarkokontrol* is to be spent on social advertising and other forms of propaganda, with \$2.1 million going directly to NGOs. The program aims to create "a unified system of positive moral values, ensuring a negative attitude towards illicit drug consumption." This is an approach that takes the shape of a centralized Soviet-style agitation campaign, but without serious effect.

The main problem with the program, however, is that its budget is too small to achieve its targeted aims. For 2006, anti-narcotics agencies will receive fourteen times the funds allocated to the program. If the program's complex of primarily social measures, which aims to diminish drug addiction by 20 percent, has a four-year budget of \$108 million, the need to fund the anti-narcotics agencies at \$299 million in 2006 alone looks doubtful. Given these numbers, the new program cannot be regarded as a crucial turn toward a demand reduction strategy.

Conclusion

For Russia the problem of illicit drugs is both one of the most serious challenges for national security and a social issue comparable to alcoholism. The drug problem is a powerful source of nourishment for

antidemocratic, xenophobic, anti-Western, and also anti-Muslim sentiments. Together with terrorism, it can easily be used as a justification for the strengthening of security structures and mass human rights violations.

Meanwhile, the effectiveness of a restrictive policy is minimal. Traffickers have numerous opportunities to smuggle drugs by different means, including via existing checkpoints, and corrupt state employees with low salaries facilitate the smuggling and distribution of illegal drugs. Centralized agitation against drugs by unprofessional bureaucrats is unlikely to reduce demand. The situation requires a complex and well-financed social policy that involves NGOs as well as advertising, health protection, youth policy, sport, and religious professionals.

Currently, a demand reduction strategy does attract the attention of decisionmakers. The new federal anti-drug program has more of a social character than a repressive one. This shift, however, is not yet supported by sufficient financial and organizational resources. The choice between a security approach and a demand reduction approach which depends on civic activity remains on the agenda.

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