A Sobering Reality: Understanding Russia's Alcohol Morbidity and Mortality from an Epidemiological and Political Approach

Peter Shyba

Previously published in the McGill Daily under the title "Historical Hard Drinking."

If Vodka cost a dollar fifty a dollar fifty for half a litre, how much of it would you drink? In Russia, where the price of Vodka averages between $1.50 and $3.00, the answer is simple: a lot [2]. Each year an average of 19,000 Russians die from alcohol poisoning and hundreds of thousands of others suffer the ill consequences of excess alcohol consumption – cirrhosis of the liver, heart disease, increased risk of cancer, type-twodiabetes, impaired mental development, and road accidents [1].

Between 2.5 and 20 million Russians are estimated to be alcoholics, contributing to the ten year gap in the life expectancy between genders (with men dying earlier than women), the highest of such gaps in the world [1][3]. The endemic effects of alcoholism are seen not just in Russia, but also among the whole block of former Soviet countries. While the rest of the developed world has progressed in terms of life expectancy, former Soviet Union countries have largely lagged behind.

New measures implemented by Russian president Dmitry Medvedev last winter that set a minimum price of vodka at $3.00 per pint (around half a litre) are meant to offset the detrimental effects that alcohol has, not only on the international image of Russia but also on its economic stability [4]. According to a Time Magazine poll, an estimated $8 billion from the Russian economy is lost per year due to drinking. This is due in part to the roughly 25 per cent of Russians who admit to drinking before work, while another 20 per cent drink during work itself [5]. While its too early to tell now if the measures have been effective, one can presume that the laws, meant to deter the poorest of Russians from imbibing too frequently will in fact backfire. Russians will continue to drink, and

those who can't afford the $3 minimum may turn to illegal vodkas.

Bloomberg Business estimated that the black market accounts for 1.2 billion litres of alcohol consumption in Russia, half of the countries yearly average [6]. This bootlegged vodka accounts for about 127.6 billion rubles (around US $400 million) annually [6]. This black market Vodka comes in two different forms. The first is alcohol that is made in factories "off book", whereby factory workers manufacture extra vodka to sell for profits above their usually low wages. The second and more dangerous form is vodka that isn't actually vodka at all, but rather chemicals like household cleaning product or medicines mixed with water. In 2004 the Yekaterinburg district of Russia suffered three deaths and dozens of hospitalizations when residents drank disinfectants passed off as alcohol [11].

Perhaps the most interesting facet of this problem is the seeming paradox it presents to the liberal-minded international development community. Hobbess statement of life being "nasty and brutish and short," is true for many Russian men, whose life expectancy for is roughly sixty years old [3]. This statement has become an indelible call to arms for demographers and social scientists as a community, who constantly challenge this statement and implement policies with the primary intention of increasing life expectancy and disproving the verisimilitude of Hobbes's famous claim. Logic follows that since liberal democracies have seen a dramatic increase in life expectancy and quality of life, then development strategies that encourage liberalization (economically, politically and socially) will, in turn, increase life expectancy, health, and wealth.

Why then, was life expectancy at one of its highest points in Russia in the 1960s [3], arguably at the peak of the USSR? Why then is the gap in male and female health outcomes continuing to widen even though Russia is becoming relatively more liberal? The answer may lie in the bottom of the vodka bottle.

There are few things more stereotypically Russian than vodka, and the drink holds a fervent national significance. In 1977, Poland filed a claim to an international trade court that its nation was in fact the inventor of vodka and as such, was the only country with the right to market the drink [7]. If the claim had been accepted, Russia would have been forced to market their vodka as "bread wine," an idea that didnt sit well with the USSR. This claim ignited a fierce battle between the two countries, with Russian"scholars" claiming the drink was first brewed in Moscow in 1440. In an era of intense domination by the Soviet superpowers, Poland

was unable to present the facts fairly; according to research done by Vice Magazine, it was in fact it was very likely Poland that first brewed vodka, technically giving them the exclusive right to market the drink[7]. The outcome of this battle would prove to be economically significant to the Russians. Vodka is now the one of the worlds most popular spirits, with annual sales in the billions of dollars. Sales of top-shelf brands like Grey Goose have risen particularly quickly, (the French-made Grey Goose was sold for $2.3 billion in 2002, the largest brand takeover in world history [8]).

In the Soviet Union, alcoholism was touted as a "relic of capitalism,"[9] where it was presumed that men were led to drink because of the exploitive nature of factory work. The belief was that through communism, alcoholism would eventually fade away. But the Soviets didnt do their homework. Alcoholism has been an issue in Russia since about 986 AD, when Muslim Bulgars encouraged Grand Prince Vladimir I to adopt Islam in that year. He declared: "Drinking is the joy of the Rus. We cannot exist without that pleasure.[9]"

Thousands of years (and many hangovers) later, Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, ordered a countrywide prohibition during the First World War [8]. Already on the brink of revolt, the Tsar's decision further loosened his tenuous grip on power. In 1985, Gorbachev did the same as a part of Glasnost and Perestroika. Between 1955 and 1984, alcohol consumption had increased 250% in Russia [10], and Gorbachev decided to do something about it. He ordered limited hours on liquor stores and decreased the amount of alcohol restaurants could serve to patrons. Many began to drink cologne and rubbing alcohol with devastating health consequences [11]. Six years after that prohibition, the USSR was no more. Alcohol consumption seems to be a frequent and important aspect of Russian history and culture.

This history of alcoholism may give us some answer to the question of Russias poor life expectancy. Those dwelling in the former Soviet Union have historically been prone to alcoholism, in part, because there have been few occasions in history when these countries have been ethnically and nationally determined. It would seem that without autonomous leadership, these countries fall victim to a sense of pervasive helplessness, which in turn leads to a dependence on alcohol to escape. Their alcoholism is a somatization of their political repression. Similar to the condition known as Nervos[12], described by medical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Russian alcoholism is likely more political than biological or cultural in its epidemiology. In viewing the issue of alcoholism as a political issue rather than a biolog-

ical one, it becomes less pervasive.

Even now, under what is called "democracy," Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, and other former Soviet bloc dwellers live under intensely paternalistic governments. Russian people specifically rely on their government to set rules regarding consumption. There are few rehabilitation centres, support groups, or government policies to help with prevention. The Russian government, now officially a "democracy," refuses to let go of Soviet style-paternalism when it comes to the health outcomes of its people. By extension, the stranglehold that Russia still has on its former satellites prevents them from truly liberalizing healthcare.

Ukrainians are now just starting to get their footing as a free country. The Orange Revolution signaling Ukraine's desire to end Russian dependence and join the European Union may be the exact freedom the Ukrainian people desire. Maybe then, once wealth can be created and the Russians lose their dominance over the region, the former Soviets have a reason to stay alive, and sober.

Peter Shyba is a second year McGill student studying International Devlopment and the Social Study of Medicine, and is currently a visiting student at the University of Calgary. His interest lies in the History of Medicine in developing countries, especially former communist nations.

References

[1] Kamenev, Marina. (2009). Russia's Artisanal Moonshine Boom. *Time Magazine* Retreived online.

[2] Suddath, Claire.(2010) Russians and Vodka. *Time Magazine* Retreived online.

[3] Http://gapminder.org. Retreived February 2nd 2011.

[4] Barry, Ellen. (2010)In Russia, a New Year and a New Price for Vodka. *New York Times.*

[5] Moody, John, James O. Jackson, and Nancy Traver. (1985) Soviet Union Fighting the Battle of the Bottle. *Time Magazine* Retreived online.

[6] Ermakova, Maria, and Andrew Cleary. (2009). Russian Blitz on Bootlegged Vodka May Be Boon for Synergy Sales. *Bloomberg Business* Retreived online.

[7] www.vbs.tv/watch/the-vice-guide-to-travel/wodka-wars. Retreived February 2nd 2011.

[8] Prial, Frank J. (2005). The Seller of the Goose That Laid a Golden Egg. *New York Times.*

[9] Blocker, Jack S., David M. Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrrell. (2003). *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: an International Encyclopedia.* Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Print.

[10] Veni, Vidi, Vodka.(1989). *The Economist (US).*

[11] http://www.inform.kz/eng/article/2089456 Accessed February 2nd 2011.

[12] Scheper-Hughes, Nancy.(1992). *Death without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil.* Berkeley: University of California.