

# Medvedev Gets Tough on Illegal Drugs

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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President Medvedev visiting a children's sports school Monday in Irkutsk. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

President Dmitry Medvedev called Monday for a crackdown on rampant drug use, proposing compulsory treatment for addicts and nationwide drug testing for grade school students.

He also proposed expelling drug-using college students, allowing employers to fire employees who use illegal drugs, and cracking down on clubs and web sites where drugs can be purchased.

Experts said the proposals resembled a Kremlin attempt to score points before State Duma and presidential elections, but also called the measures long overdue.

Drug addiction is a national disaster, Medvedev said, with the number of addicts estimated at 2.5 million, or more than 2 percent of the population, and steadily growing since the Soviet collapse. UN figures indicate that Russia consumes 21 percent of all Afghan heroin — almost twice as much as China — and as many as 30,000 Russians die annually from heroin alone.

Still, the government has done little to curb drug use, rejecting drug treatment programs and attacking foreign donors and nongovernmental groups helping addicts, even while accusing foreigners of fueling an HIV epidemic boosted mainly by drug use.

Now things are set to change, Medvedev said.

"There have been no changes for the better ... even though the topic has attracted a lot of attention," Medvedev said at a State Council session held in Irkutsk, where some 13,000 of the population of 2.5 million are drug users, according to local health data.

Medvedev said Russia was losing 2 percent to 3 percent of its GDP due to drug use, and there are some 200,000 drug-related crimes committed annually, Interfax reported.

Seventy percent of addicts are under 30, and the age of first-time drug users has dropped to 11 or 12 years over the past five years, Medvedev said.

He ordered the drafting of legislation to make drug testing in schools universal, although he gave no time frame and did not name the agency that will handle the task.

School drug tests, which are carried out in many European countries, have been embraced by parents in the Russian regions where the testing has been introduced as a pilot program, children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov said at the Irkutsk session.

Medvedev also said compulsory treatment should be the main legal punishment for drug addicts who commit minor crimes, with convicts only sent to jail if they refused treatment. He ordered the government and the Kremlin to study the idea and report to him in June.

Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov suggested making drug use a criminal offense at the same session. Medvedev did not comment on the proposal, which could land thousands of addicts behind bars.

Among other proposals voiced by the president was a call to amend the law to allow the dismissal of narcotics-using employees and to crack down on "thousands" of web sites offering illegal drugs for sale. To illustrate the point on web sites, Medvedev looked up instructions on how to prepare illegal drugs using legal medical drugs on the Yandex search engine during the session and received numerous hits.

Experts contacted by The Moscow Times said the proposed measures were harsh but necessary considering the growing problem, but cautioned that the Kremlin should expand the crackdown to corrupt drug fighters to achieve visible results.

"This is an urgent topic," Nina Ostanina, a State Duma deputy with the Communists, said by telephone.

"But," she added, "when it is raised now, six months before the [Duma] elections, it does look like populism."

She expressed concern that the measures would fight the consequences, not the causes, of drug use. "Drugs are a business that is protected by law enforcement agencies, among others," said Ostanina, who sits on the Duma's youth affairs committee.

"They should test not just grade school students but drug fighters within the police as well," said Yevgeny Roizman, one of the country's most renowned anti-drug crusaders.

Roizman said he welcomed Medvedev's measures. "The war with drugs cannot be waged through weak methods. Even a small liberalization [of policies] can lead to a collapse," he said by telephone from Yekaterinburg.

Roizman's anti-drug group, City Without Drugs, has campaigned against corrupt anti-drug police in the region, seeking investigations and criminal cases against officers who patron illegal drug networks.

But the group has also taken flak from rights groups, some of which claim its tough rehabilitation methods are illegal. City Without Drugs activist Yegor Bychkov was jailed in October on kidnapping charges over his treatment of several addicts who were chained to beds as treatment. Bychkov has said the case was retribution by corrupt officials whom he criticized. The prison sentence was suspended on appeal, but the case highlighted the shortcomings of current legislation on drug treatment.

The situation may change if mandatory testing and treatment are introduced, but there is also a danger that the measures will only create a new "system of money laundering," said Vitaly Bogdanchikov, head of a Moscow-based drug rehab center.

Bogdanchikov, who is also an adviser with the Public Chamber's health care committee, pointed out that a drug test costs \$10 to \$15 per person, which implies the need to create a multimillion-dollar program for students across the country.

But he also said the situation is dire — possibly even more so than Medvedev paints it.

"Medvedev voiced the figure of 2.5 million drug users, but in my opinion the figure is much higher," Bogdanchikov said. "Authorities are just afraid to speak about the real figures."

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