

Lots of Smoke on No Tobacco Day

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A worker pausing for a smoke break Tuesday as construction work wraps up on the downtown Moskva Hotel. **Vladimir Filonov**

The average Russian reaches for a cigarette pack 17 times each day, and that practice isn't likely to change anytime soon since the country lags in labeling tobacco packaging, Federal Consumer Protection Service chief Gennady Onishchenko said Tuesday at a news conference to mark World No Tobacco Day.

Onishchenko praised anti-smoking efforts in Europe and around the world, but noted that his homeland is still far from kicking its smoking habit.

"Europe now clearly states: We will not grow, produce or consume [tobacco] products," he said. "And I am confident that this 'decaying' Europe will deal with the problem, while we will deliberate, practice eloquent speeches and keep on smoking."

The Australian parliament is set to pass a law that would force tobacco companies to use plain green cigarette packaging, Reuters reported. Under the new law, companies won't be allowed

to place their logos on the packs and would have to write the product name in a standard text and color.

The new law is expected to take effect at the start of 2012. New Zealand, Canada, Britain and the European Union are considering similar laws.

But Russia is not even at the stage where the government and tobacco companies can agree on the notices that are put on cigarette packs.

The notice “one million people die from tobacco each year” is standard on European packaging but was rejected here because it was seen as too shocking for “sensitive” Russians, Onishchenko said. He called current warning labels on cigarette packs “a mockery of common sense.”

Onishchenko said he supports putting photographs of diseased organs on cigarette packaging, although his efforts to organize that were rebuffed by tobacco companies. “This is my wish that I dream of each night,” he said of the photograph initiative.

Raising federal taxes on tobacco products would be the most effective way to curb the country’s smoking habit, Onishchenko said. He suggested raising taxes by at least 50 percent.

Russia has some of the lowest prices on tobacco products in the world. About 40 percent of the 402.7 billion cigarettes produced domestically each year are in the low-end segment, and even higher-priced cigarettes are cheaper than popular brands in the European Union, according to a statement by the watchdog.

The Finance Ministry is discussing increasing taxes on tobacco products, but no concrete decisions have yet been made, the ministry’s press office told The Moscow Times.

Onishchenko also suggested limiting tobacco advertising, licensing tobacco retailers, banning tobacco sales to minors and expanding the anti-smoking campaign.

Russia is one of the top five smoking countries in the world with 40 percent of the adult population smoking. Tobacco companies produced 2,838 cigarettes — nearly 142 packs — per person in 2010, up from 499 cigarettes in 1995.

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