The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Cigarettes and Alcohol Occupy Pushkin Square

By Roland Oliphant

May 27, 2012



A protester's sign: "We oppose discrimination against small business!" **Roland Oliphant**

The movement that gave us rallying cries like "for fair elections" and "Putin thief!" may have found a new slogan to add to its repertoire: "cigarettes and alcohol."

Opposition figures including Just Russia Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov were among several speakers to address a newly formed trade association called the Coalition of Kiosk Owners, which rallied on Pushkin Square on Saturday to protest plans to prohibit the ubiquitous small retail outlets from selling beer and tobacco.

"Just as you cannot get an honest response [from the authorities] about your trade issues, so we can't get honest voting figures for the elections. Our struggles are one and the same," Gudkov told the crowd as he invited them to the next opposition demonstration on June 12.

The similarity between the two movements is debatable. The Coalition of Kiosk owners was

founded at the beginning of April not to fight for electoral justice, but for the rather more pragmatic right to peddle cigarettes and alcohol.

A new law on regulating alcohol that is set to come into force on Jan. 1 will ban sales of any drink containing more than 0.5 percent alcohol from "nonstationary trade outlets" — legalese for kiosks.

A separate bill proposed by the Health Ministry will forbid the sale of tobacco products from such venues and any shop smaller than 50 square meters.

Small-business people say both bills are a thinly veiled attack on the sector. "Of course it's necessary to fight alcoholism and smoking. But that's not deterring smoking; it is handing supermarkets and chain stores a monopoly," said Natalya Kosheleva, a lawyer for a company that runs a chain of kiosks in Novosibirsk and one of the founders of the nascent trade group.

"We're entrepreneurs, and it is true that we don't usually come out onto the streets. But we're here because no one is listening to us," she added.

Though the movement is still small — only about 150 people showed up Saturday, although the organizers had a permit for 1,000 — the rally succeeded in bringing together representatives of the sector from across the country.

"In Vladivostok no one can hear us," said Sergei Kovolenko, who added that his own little empire of 20 kiosks in the far eastern city had been reduced to nine following run-ins with the city authorities over land rent.

"Here, on the main square of the country, at least we have a chance of being heard."

Kovolenko said beer and tobacco each account for 30 percent of sales from his kiosks — meaning that he would lose 60 percent of his turnover if the laws come into effect.

Igor Yevdokimov, who said alcohol and tobacco account for about 30 percent of sales from the 12 kiosks he runs in Orenburg, believes that the law is a deliberate attack on the sector.

"It's just the first step. ... First it'll be tobacco and beer; then they'll find an excuse to stop us selling bread. And then you won't be able to sell anything from a kiosk," he said.

The entrepreneurs agreed that those with vested interests in supermarket chains were behind the new legislation.

Yevdokimov saw a deeper conspiracy.

"It's not only that the oligarchs want our business, that's just the surface," he said. "The real people behind this law want Russians to be nothing more than cattle." He then said that the current government is in league with Western powers to plunder the country's natural resources.

Yevdokimov darkly predicted that the law would "produce a lot of corpses."

"It will be just like when Gorbachev introduced prohibition and people started drinking

anything they could get their hands on," he said.

Kiosk owners said they feel the sector is under deliberate and sustained attack. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin made a point of clearing "unsightly" kiosks off the streets when he came to power at the end of 2010 — which explained the large "Give us back [former Mayor Yury] Luzhkov!" banner at Saturday's rally.

And kiosk operators also say they are under constant pressure from unclear and often arbitrarily applied laws on land rent and taxes — a grievance that Kosheleva says is the coalition's next priority after the tobacco and alcohol laws.

The political opposition seems keen to capitalize on the discontent. In addition to Gudkov, speakers on Saturday included Andrei Babushkin of Yabloko and Igor Bakirov, a young coordinator of the white ribbon movement, who showed up in an "Occupy Abai" T-shirt.

"Putin and Medvedev are always going on about supporting small business. Do you like how they are supporting small business?" Gudkov roared at the small crowd. He managed to elicit a ragged "no!"

But as a group the kiosk owners seem ambivalent about politicizing. Kosheleva insisted that the event and their demands were "nonpolitical" and repeatedly denied that the movement had been inspired by the wave of street protests that the country has seen since December.

Others, including Kovolenko from Vladivostok, said they were "too busy for politics" and did not want to be associated with the "provocateurs" attracted to opposition demonstrations.

But many other demonstrators wore the white ribbons of the honest elections movement. Yevdokimov, the entrepreneur from Orenburg, said he would be attending his first opposition event later that afternoon.

Gudkov thinks there is clear common ground.

"I came because I know the difficulties faced by small businesses," Gudkov told The Moscow Times. "They're some of the most creative people in society, they make things under their own steam and they are very important to the country. They should join us in reforming the state."

Gudkov and his father Gennady, also a deputy with A Just Russia, run a private security firm called Oskord. Police raided one of its subsidiaries in May, in what Gudkov senior called punishment for his prominent involvement with the opposition.

Asked whether he would take up the kiosk owners' cause in the Duma and help fight the new tobacco and alcohol laws, he said the position would be "discussed" within the Just Russia faction.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/27/cigarettes-and-alcohol-occupy-pushkin-square-a15026