

Turning Scientists Into Drug Traffickers

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In mid-August, investigators with the Federal Drug Control Service arrested 55-year-old Olga Zelenina, the head of the Penza Agricultural Research Institute's analytical laboratory and one of Russia's top experts on poppy cultivation, for the findings of her scientific research.

There are a lot of Kafkaesque incidents in Russia's bizarre judicial system, but this one tops them all.

So-called poppy busts by the authorities have become more frequent lately. They all follow the same pattern: A businessman imports poppy seeds to be used in Russia's popular poppy-seed buns, and federal drug control agents throw him in jail for drug trafficking. Their argument: Fragments of poppy plant stems inevitably get mixed up with the seeds during the harvest, and the stems contain an opiate. The federal agents equate the presence of these trace elements in the shipment to drug trafficking.

As a recognized expert in the field, Zelenina's laboratory offered its opinion on a case involving a businessperson by the last name of Shilov who had imported 42 tons of poppy seeds from Spain in 2010.

Zelenina wrote in her findings that it is natural for such impurities to be present in a large quantity of poppy seeds. She wrote that Shilov's poppy seeds contained 0.00069 percent morphine and 0.00049 percent codeine, and that such miniscule quantities of opiates could only be extracted with the help of a first-rate laboratory.

Zelenina now finds herself threatened with a 20-year prison term. Her crime was concluding very scientifically that two multiplied by two equals four, when she ought to have known that in Russia, two times two equals 17 — or whatever the ruling authorities decide it equals.

As I have already mentioned, the poppy seeds themselves do not contain opiates, but any quantity of harvested seeds will inevitably include tiny fragments of poppy plant stems that do contain trace amounts of opiates. The old government standard allowed shipments of seeds to contain up to 3 percent plant stems, but the new standard does not allow any — zero percent.

That new government standard for poppy plant stems is not the only document from federal agents to defy the laws of chemistry and biology.

Several years ago, Russia was rocked by the "case of the chemists" after federal agents pushed through legislation that equated the precursors of narcotics to the narcotics themselves. A precursor is a substance from which you can make drugs. For example, morphine is a precursor for heroine.

But the Federal Drug Control Service rewrote the chemistry textbook and decided that a precursor is a substance that you can use to make a drug. For example, sulfuric acid, hydrochloric acid, toluene and acetone were recategorized in this way. Considering that no less than 11.5 million tons of sulfuric acid are produced annually in Russia, the number of potential narcotics producers rose significantly. It also became possible to bring charges of selling narcotics against anyone who sold acetone. And that is exactly what happened.

At the same time, the Russian law on narcotics was amended in 2007, making it possible for drug control officers to transport the narcotics they uncovered without destroying them.

Obviously, any agency that makes it legal for its officers to transport the narcotics it seizes without destroying them is going to have trouble stopping the drug trade. After all, it is difficult to fight against the illegal trade you are personally engaged in.

Since the Federal Drug Control Service badly needed something positive to report, it decided to battle against poppy seeds and top researchers who refuse to go along with the amazing scientific discoveries made by the agency.

Yulia Latynina hosts a radio talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

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