The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

State Finds Cure for Hangover

By Roland Oliphant

January 14, 2013



From now on, consumers who want a beer before the witching hour will have to walk a little further to a convenience store or supermarket. And after 11 p.m. they'll have to get off the street and into a bar, where they probably belong anyway. **Vladimir Filonov**

The Health Ministry's chief narcologist, Yevgeny Bryun, warned Monday that it would take a month for many Russians to recover from the excesses of New Year's celebrations.

"Long holidays are in any event bad. Long-term abuse of alcohol is always bad; it has chronic toxic impacts, the effects of which can last a month. Alcohol is only fully processed after 3 weeks," he told Interfax.

And citizens who followed the time-honored tradition of the alcohol-soaked 10-day break by trying to restock from their local kiosk were rudely surprised to find they are getting unsolicited state support to dry out.

Since Jan. 1, retail sales of any alcoholic product have been banned between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m.

Restrictions on alcoholic beverage sales have been increasing in recent years. Vodka and wine were taken off the late-night shopping list in 2010, but for years, beer had evaded time limits applied to other drinks by dint of being classified as a foodstuff.

As of the first day of the new year, that loophole was finally closed, resulting in many a visit to the local 24-hour shop ending in disappointment.

At the same time, outlets smaller than 50-square meters — meaning the ubiquitous kiosks that have been the most convenient source of a casual beer for the past two decades — were banned from selling alcohol at any time.

Now consumers who want a beer before the witching hour will have to walk a little further to a convenience store or supermarket. And after 11 p.m. they'll have to get off the street and into a bar, where they probably belong anyway.

But kiosk operators fear the law could spell extinction.

The Coalition of Kiosk Owners, a trade association that was formed specifically to fight the ban last year, says the impact since the start of the year is already tangible.

A small shop on Tsvetnoi Bulvar is typical of the outlets the association says might have to close.

The half a dozen beer-packed fridges that used to occupy much of the tiny shop's floor space have disappeared.

So have many of the customers who would stop by to pick up their bottles of Baltika and a packet of smokes. A recent visit at a time of day when the shop would previously have been bustling found it almost deserted.

"What do you think? Bad. Very bad," said Marina, a sales assistant who declined to give her last name when asked about the volume of business since Jan. 1.

A sign outside pushes fruit and vegetables, juice, cookies and household goods, among other perfectly wholesome and legal products.

But the staff was gloomy about the prospects of life as a wholesome local grocery store. "We simply don't know if we're going to survive," Marina said.

Kiosk owners campaigning against the law last year estimated that alcohol sales account on average for 40 percent of turnover — meaning the ban could be crippling.

It is possible the shop assistant was being disingenuous. While a Moscow Times reporter failed to buy illicit beer at two kiosks in recent days, the Russian blogosphere is full of tales of outlets ignoring the restrictions.

The RBK Daily reported kiosks continuing to sell beer openly in Bryansk, while one blogger reported that many traders in Moscow were "still selling to regulars" from under the counter.

If the ban on booze weren't enough, similar restrictions on tobacco sales could finish off

the kiosks for good.

The Economic Development Ministry estimates 175,000 kiosks across the country will be forced out of business and up to 500,000 people put out of work if a bill banning tobacco sales at small outlets becomes law.

The bill, which will also ban smoking in public places, sailed through a first reading in the State Duma in December, and is expected to enter into force by 2016.

But officials insist that the moves are necessary for the health of the nation.

In a response to the coalition's complaints released last month, the presidential administration said that the measures are part of the government's commitment under a state strategy of reducing alcohol abuse by 2020 and the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which Russia ratified in 2008.

The Coalition of Kiosk owners said it had sent another letter to President Vladimir Putin complaining that these "vague phrases about the health of the population" failed to address their concerns.

"We argued in detail that the already passed and planned bans on certain sales puts the country's entire small retail sector under threat," said the letter, dated Wednesday.

Male life expectancy was at 64 in 2011, according to the State Statistics Service, while the figure for females was at 75.6 years.

Health experts cite high alcohol and tobacco consumption as major contributors to men's early deaths.

Bryun of the Health Ministry advised those battling with an epic post New Year's hangover to seek pharmaceutical help.

"Pharmacies have succinic acid, which can be used. There are drugs to improve metabolism. And I basically recommend liquid, vitamins, vitamin C," he said. "But nothing especially tragic happened this year, and for that we are grateful."

Related articles:

- '10 Days of Horror' Lie Ahead, Says Chief Sanitary Inspector
- Vodka Prices to Rise
- Health Ministry Gears Up for Mass Medical Checkups

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/01/14/state-finds-cure-for-hangover-a20608