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Dispelling the Smoke Screen

By Alexei Pankin

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The statement that "smoking is harmful to your health" is only a theory, not a medical fact.

Take, for example, the finding that a nonsmoker would have to be exposed to the smoke from 1,170 cigarettes over a 10-hour period in an average 30-square-meter room to receive the "minimal risk" dosage of methyl chloride. In the same room, it would require 222,000 cigarettes to produce the "minimal risk" of benzopyrene. Smokers and nonsmokers have an almost equal chance of contracting cancer, and those who quit smoking have a slightly higher incidence than those who continue.

These statistics were recently published by journalist Dmitry Kosyrev, a deputy director at a key news division of RIA Novosti, and in my opinion, Russia's best international commentator. In other words, this is a person who stands behind everything he writes. The information cited here was published on Tabak-zakon.ru, the website of the national smokers' rights movement. What's more, each of the statements includes links to the results of world-class research so that readers can check the accuracy of the statements themselves.

For example, Philippe Even, a prominent pulmonologist and former head of French research institute Necker, holds that the alleged dangers of passive smoke are unsubstantiated. But he waited until retiring from his post before publishing his scientific findings to avoid the wrath of anti-smoking zealots. If that surprises you, recall "Climategate," when it became known in 2009 that the world's leading scientists had been fooling the public for 15 years into believing that global warming was caused by human factors. Such scandals have been rife over the past two decades — everything from the Y2K scare and the ozone hole to swine flu and bird flu.

Ironically, at the same time that Russia's anti-smoking campaign was shaken to its very foundations, Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's chief sanitary inspector and main anti-smoking advocate, was dismissed from his post. He was known for his idealism and self-righteousness, coupled with his access to administrative resources. In recognition of the dual-sided nature of his character, journalist Mikhail Leontyev dubbed Onishchenko the "Führer of Hygiene." Onishchenko even threatened to crack down on the State Duma if it interfered with his battle against smoking.

Fortunately, the conflict did not end in another Russian Revolution. The new anti-smoking law was immediately dubbed the anti-smokers law. Overnight, the 50 percent of Russians who smoke were turned into victims and potential lawbreakers. Airports are suing for the right to install rooms for smokers, and when the ban on advertising tobacco products goes into effect this November, newspapers and magazines will lose up to 3 percent of their advertising revenues — with no means in sight for making up lost profits. That means that people's favorite publications will go up in price, print runs will decline, and people will be put out of work. And all of this in the name of fighting an evil that it turns out might be nothing more than a phantom.

Perhaps Onishchenko's departure will do something to ameliorate the lives of smokers and the economy.

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