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Oppression Won't Cure Russia's Drug Addiction

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In the past month, at least 800 Russians have been poisoned after using synthetic marijuana and other smoking blends known collectively as "spice." At least 25 people died.

Spice represents a new kind of drug threat in which the substance's synthesis is unlimited. No government in the world is able to react swiftly enough to prevent new types of designer drugs from hitting the market disguised as legal smoking blends, bath salts or plant food.

The arrival of new types of synthetic drugs, whose chemical formulas can be swiftly tweaked in order for the substance to remain technically legal, suggests that rather than focusing on the supply of drugs in Russia, it would be more expedient to work at decreasing demand in order to alleviate the situation.

There are 8 million drug users in Russia, half of whom are officially classified as addicts. These people spend at least 1.5 trillion rubles ($37 billion) on drugs including heroin, cocaine, marijuana and spice every year, Federal Drug Control Service head Viktor Ivanov told Ekho Moskvy radio last week. This is equivalent to the annual tax revenues of Moscow, a city of 12

million. Eighty percent of all deaths of Russians aged 18 to 34 are caused by drugs, Ivanov said.

At present, the Russian government is desperately trying to crush the drug market with force. At the same time, there is not a single government program to work with demand. Policymakers need to see drug use in a holistic way, to understand that social ills directly correspond to its proliferation. Russians must be able to resolve difficulties without resorting to repressing them with drugs. Drugs must become irrelevant in Russia.

Simplistic "just say no" anti-drug policies need to disappear from the public agenda. Numerous anti-drug marathons and other campaigns have the opposite effect to that intended and end up promoting the substances, experts say. Practicing a sport, contrary to the official line, is not in fact guaranteed to prevent or cure drug addiction. At the same time, drug users should no longer be marginalized. Non-governmental organizations that deal with drugs must be supported rather than vilified, and allowed to work at schools to mediate violence among students with the ultimate aim of reducing and preventing drug use.

Policymakers must realize that taking drugs or drinking alcohol is often simply the most obvious and immediate reaction to social problems that people have to cope with from childhood: abuse, social anxiety and disorientation, a lack of societal consensus on values and lack of meritocracy, among many others.

The spread of drug use is a barometer of the problems facing Russia and its society at any given moment. Furthermore, experts say the level of violence in a society directly corresponds to the spread of drugs.

Ivanov's agency is currently lobbying hard for the authority to ban synthetic drugs unilaterally. Another bill currently being discussed by the State Duma would make drug addiction a criminal offense punishable by up to six months in prison. Currently, the maximum penalty for drug use is up to 15 days in detention, and more usually it is punished with a fine.

Russia already convicts more people for drug-related crimes than India and China combined. In the past five years, 1.2 million Russians have been charged with drug-related offenses. Yet in addition to 120 departments in hospitals, there are only three separate drug rehabilitation centers across Russia right now. Out of 4 million drug addicts, 300 are currently undergoing treatment in these facilities, according to Ivanov.

At the same time, about 16,000 drug addicts are currently being treated in some 500 non-governmental centers, according to the drug control agency. Most of these centers suffer from a lack of funding and sometimes even electricity. Some of the most successful and famous ones, such as Yevgeny Roizman's City Without Drugs in Yekaterinburg, are subject to persistent raids by local government officials.

Russia's drug problem clearly demonstrates that the country cannot solve its ills by simply punishing users. There may be no silver bullet for the drug problem, but the scale of its spread in Russia makes the fight against it a strategic imperative for the country's future.

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