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Russia's Drug Tsar Invokes Mark Twain in Denying Agency's Closure

By Peter Spinella

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"Reports of my agency's death have been greatly exaggerated," Viktor Ivanov, the head of Russia's drug control agency, told reporters on Tuesday, in a play on a popular quote of great American author Mark Twain.

Ivanov said that authorities were considering downsizing the agency by 10 to 15 percent, the Interfax news outlet reported. The anti-drug agency currently has about 35,000 staff members.

Ivanov, who served as a presidential aide before joining the agency in 2008, denied reports that he was planning to return to the presidential administration upon the closure of his agency.

"There have not been any such proposals or discussions," he was cited as saying Tuesday.

Russian media widely reported Monday that President Vladimir Putin had issued an order to disband the Federal Drug Control Service on March 1 and redistribute its functions between the Interior and Health ministries.

The Moscow Times obtained a copy of a document attesting to the order and apparently signed last week by Larisa Brychyova, head of the presidential administration's legal directorate.

The federal budget last year allocated about 29.5 billion rubles (currently $470 million) to the drug control agency, according to its website.

Russia has the highest rate of opiate use in Eastern Europe, according to a United Nations report last year. Many of the opiates come from Afghanistan, the world's No. 1 producer of heroin.

Russia's government said in a 2013 report that there are 8.5 million drug addicts nationwide — almost 6 percent of the population.

The Twain quote, "reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," is commonly attributed to the 19th-century author but is actually something of a misquote.

The direct quote, made to The New York Journal in June 1897, was "The report of my death was an exaggeration," according to the Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins.

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