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Russia tightens its anti-alcohol legislation

On 20 July, President Dmitri Medvedev signed an amendment to the law on state regulation of the production and distribution of alcohol, introducing restrictions on its consumption, sale and advertising; and on 21 July, he signed another law providing for criminal liability for the sale of alcoholic beverages to minors. The new rules are part of the campaign Medvedev announced in 2009 to combat Russian alcoholism, but it seems doubtful that they will have the desired effect.

Excessive alcohol consumption in Russia is a very important social problem; among others it contributes to high premature male mortality, which is one of the Russian Federation's major demographic problems. The most important change introduced by the new regulations is to extend the anti-alcohol provisions to beer, which had previously been treated as a normal food item. In addition, alcohol will be sold only in non-mobile commercial facilities (which will eliminate the small kiosks which are popular in Russia). The act prohibits the sale of alcohol in places of mass gatherings, including sports facilities, railway stations, bus stops, petrol stations, airports and transport systems. It also prohibits the advertising of alcohol on radio, television and billboards. As of 1 January 2012 the drinking of alcohol in public places will be banned. From 2013, night-time prohibition will come into effect, banning the sale of alcohol from 11pm to 8am, with the exception of bars and restaurants.

The Russian authorities are trying to solve the problem of alcoholism by administrative methods, in isolation from questions of preventive health care, early education and so on. The experience of partial prohibition, as introduced in the perestroika period by Mikhail Gorbachev, shows that banning the sale of alcohol at night does not necessarily bring about a decline in consumption, while limiting beer sales can result in increased consumption of spirits, including illegal domestic distillations. The absolute enforcement of these stringent rules could result in increased public discontent with the government. <agaw>