

COVID-19: A need for stricter control over unrecorded alcohol in Russia

COVID-19: La necesidad de un control más estricto sobre el alcohol no registrado en Rusia

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on various aspects of life and directly or indirectly affected the health of the population in many countries (Lancet COVID-19 Commissioners et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). In Russia, in January-August 2020 the total number of deaths per 100,000 population increased by 0.8 cases compared to the same period in 2019 (13.2/100,000 in 2020 vs. 12.4/100,000 population in 2019). The registered unemployment rate increased by 2.1% and accounted for 6.4%. In the second quarter of 2020, when a regime of “self-isolation” was introduced to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2 infection, the real disposable income of the population decreased by 8.4% compared to the same period in 2019 (RosStat, 2020). 61% of Russia’s population noted a decrease in income, 13.5% reported a complete loss of income, while 9.8% completely lost their employment (Artamonov & Lavrentyev, 2020).

Simultaneously with these changes, during the first months of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, several regions of the Russian Federation (Karelia, Yakutia, Tuva, Khakassia, Bashkortostan, Vladimir and Sverdlovsk Oblasts, and other regions) introduced restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages due to concerns about the possible induced by the pandemic increase in alcohol consumption and associated with it adverse health and social outcomes.

These various changes and disruptions of life caused by the pandemic crisis suggested a high probability of an increase or, at least, a slowdown in the reduction in unrecorded alcohol consumption in Russia in 2020, particularly among the most disadvantaged sections of the Russian population (e.g. unemployed/on irregular employment, poor, homeless, heavy drinking populations). During the pandemic, unrecorded alcohol consumption might have again become more prevalent, just as it has repeatedly become during a number of previous socio-economic crises that have occurred in Russia over the past 35 years (Nemtsov, 2011; Leon & Shkolnikov, 1998; Lysova & Pridemore, 2010; WHO, 2019).

Unrecorded alcohol in Russia includes various sources of cheap ethanol, such as undeclared untaxed and falsified alcoholic beverages, homemade alcohol, nonbeverage/surrogate alcohols, and other sources. Nonbeverage alcohols include a variety of types of consumed for drinking alcohol-containing liquids: legal and illegal falsified perfumery/cosmetics spirituous liquids, spirituous bath additives, medicinal tinctures, antiseptics, technical/medicinal ethanol, and other types (Gil et al., 2018b). Over the years, these alcohols were available in retail in Russia (Gil et al., 2009; Koshkina et al., 2013; Neufeld, Lachenmeier, Hausler & Rehm, 2016; Gil et al., 2018a) and their consump-

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tion was associated with a seven-fold increase in the risk of death, particularly among the working-age population (Leon et al., 2007). The main hazard of nonbeverage alcohols is associated with contained in them low-cost highly concentrated ethanol (up to 95% by volume). The small size of bottle (usually no more than 100 ml of volume) and associated with it low cost per single bottle also makes them affordable to most alcohol abusers, including the poorest ones.

During the period from January 2018 to September 2020, we conducted a brief assessment of the availability of nonbeverage and illegal beverage alcohols in five Russian cities: Odintsovo, Moscow, Izhevsk, Chelyabinsk, Petushki. In each city, fieldworkers visited up to 5 retail outlets and purchased samples of nonbeverage alcohols. Illicit alcoholic beverages were also purchased if they were identified in the outlets visited.

In total, 27 outlets were visited: pharmacies, markets, supermarkets, small shops, kiosks, pavilions. From these outlets, 126 samples of nonbeverage alcohols were purchased, which typically cost no more than 45 rubles (\$ 0.57, € 0.49, £ 0.44) and contained 60% or more ethyl alcohol by volume. Of the 126 samples, 59 were purchased in 2020: 35 medicinal tinctures, 9 antiseptics, 1 bottle of medicinal ethanol, 4 denatured and 7 not denatured eau-de-colognes, 1 not denatured lotion, 2 spirituous sanitizers for hand disinfection. 62.7% of them were of sorts reported to have been consumed for drinking by subjects with alcohol use disorders (Bobrova et al., 2009; Neufeld et al., 2016; Gil et al., 2018a). 57.6% and 32.2% of them contained cheaper unit of ethanol (10 ml of pure ethanol) than that in the standard Russian vodka and in the illegal vodka, respectively. Six visited outlets sold nonbeverage alcohols used for drinking 24 hours a day.

The spirituous hand sanitizers we purchased appeared on the market in the first months of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in 2020. They were sold 24-hours a day in small

street shops at a low price per single bottle (36 roubles: \$0.45, €0.39, £0.35), were not denatured, contained highly concentrated ethanol (95% by volume) with a unit cost (10 ml pure ethanol) below that of standard legal and illegal vodka, came in bottles without a dispenser, were not displayed at show-windows and were consumed for drinking according to observations of a fieldworker (Figure 1).

In 4 visited in 2020 retail outlets selling nonbeverage alcohols fieldworkers identified and purchased 9 samples of illegal alcoholic beverages. They included illegal vodka, falsified cognacs, whiskeys, and rum, which were all sold at prices below minimum prices established by the state for alcoholic beverages for 2020.

Results of our brief assessment of availability of unrecorded alcohol suggest that a variety of types of consumed for drinking nonbeverage alcohols and illegal alcoholic beverages remained available in Russian cities in 2020, while new sorts of suitable for drinking unrecorded alcohol were introduced to the market during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. spirituous hand sanitizers). These alcohols are mainly manufactured from the cheapest ethanol available, which is usually a pharmaceutical/ medicinal ethanol diverted from the legal market. Reinforcement of the previously implemented control policies described in detail elsewhere (WHO, 2019), as well as introducing new regulations targeting availability and consumption of unrecorded alcohol are warranted in Russia. Tightening control over this alcohol can be particularly important during the pandemic, which, via a combination of different mechanisms, such as stress, reduced affordability and physical availability of legal alcoholic beverages, may have increased the demand for and consumption of various types of unrecorded alcohol. Stricter control over unrecorded alcohol during the pandemic may be especially beneficial for the prevention of alcohol-attributable premature mortality among the most socially and economically disadvantaged and affected by the pandemic crisis



Figure 1. Anti-SARS-CoV-2 hand sanitizer (“hand tonic Ethyl Alpha”) used for drinking as was observed by a fieldworker, and a small street shop selling it round-the-clock, Chelyabinsk, Russia, 2020.

sections of the working-age population, whose mortality rates for several decades have had a strong influence on the mortality fluctuations in Russia as a whole.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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