

## El modelo cambiante del consumo de alcohol en Rusia

### *Changing pattern of alcohol consumption in Russia*

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**D**iscussion of a changing pattern of alcohol consumption in the former Soviet Union (SU) would not provide much insight without an overview of its social transformations since the 1990s; that is, the disintegration and shifting on the ethnic composition of the classes with higher alcohol consumption in urban areas: blue-collar workers and intelligentsia. Blue-collar workers were predominantly of an ethnic Russian background; their incomes were not high but comparable to those of intelligentsia and civil servant representatives. Although these workers were often sceptical with regard to Soviet ideology, subconsciously they were influenced by propaganda about hegemony of the proletariat and were confident of their future. Intelligentsia representatives, employed at numerous scientific institutes, were self-confident in spite of the scarce remuneration, usually accompanying their non-conformist debates with alcohol consumption. Leisure drinking for non-marginalized citizens is obviously favoured by confidence about one's own economic and physical future, by carelessness and mutual trust. The alcohol consumption in the former SU increased by over 300 % between 1950 and 1970 (Transchel, 2006), was partly caused by the confidence that Soviet people placed in their future coupled with an indulgent attitude to drunkenness on the part of the society (Kopyt, Bokin, Zaporozhenko & Tombaeva, 1974). This carefree way of life has disappeared as a consequence of the 1990s economic reforms. Many factories and scientific institutes were closed down, which

resulted in unemployment under the conditions of an almost non-existent social security system. At the same time, crime against alcoholics has widespread: appropriation of their mobile and immobile property, verbal abuse, assault and battery, abuse of their social vulnerability by employers, etc. Some of the law machinery, instead of defending the public order and law more efficiently, has been involved in protection racket, security business, and mobbing of socially unprotected citizens including alcoholics (Jargin, 2010). Obviously, such atmosphere does not predispose to leisure drinking. Moreover, according to the Federal Statistics Service (2013), arrivals from the former Soviet republics of Middle Asia and Transcaucasia exceed departures many times. Ongoing ethnic transformation of the working class, with replacement of ethnic Russian people by immigrants from areas, where alcohol consumption is less widespread, has contributed to a decrease in drunkenness. Furthermore, after the anti-alcohol campaign (1985-1988), quality of beverages has deteriorated while popular products disappeared or were replaced by surrogates. Finding that a bottle is a surrogate, sometimes bought for a considerable price, was perceived by some people as an insult and took away their appetite. Inexpensive natural wine (dry, sweet, sparkling and fortified) abundantly produced and consumed during the Soviet times, has largely disappeared. Imported and high-quality wines and spirits are hardly affordable to the mass consumer on a regular basis. In connection with this process, imitation of foreign wines and spirits in the former SU

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Figure 1. Sherry (Jerez) sold in Moscow. Beer brewed in Russia; the label gives the impression of being an imported product

should be commented. Development of Port wine in Russia has continued (Alekseeva, 2009), which is not surprising considering its popularity. Madeira wine (spelled Madera) is produced in the South. Russian-made Jerez (Sherry), sold in Moscow (Figure 1a), resembles some Spanish originals but tastes sometimes as if it had been diluted. Imitations of Champagne, Cabernet, Riesling, Sauvignon and Cognac have been manufactured in the former SU. Even today, it is reported that about 1/3 of imported wines are falsifications (News, 2012), which applies also to beer (Figure 1b). The optimal way, in our opinion, would be to keep former names such as “Crimean Madera” since customers are familiar to them. Therefore, Champagne-type wines could be named “Sekt” or “Brut”, and Port-type wines called “Ruby” or “Tawny” or be numbered (e.g. Portwein no. 33 or 72) as they were in the SU, and these denominations can be used under the condition of adherence to the original formula. Besides, imported high-quality wines and spirits should become more available to the mass consumer in Russia. In conclusion, heavy binge drinking seems to be in decline in today’s Russia, especially in large cities like Moscow. The increasingly prevalent drinking pattern is moderate consumption of beer that can be seen in many places. In contrast to the recent past, even marginalized people are rarely seen drunk in public. In addition, violations of drinkers’ human rights should be stressed, especially of aged ones, suffering from alcohol-related dementia; they are unwelcome in governmental policlinics, job offices, are sometimes abused by their families, etc. Today’s labour productivity can support the life of billions; whereas prestigious positions are scarce. Under these circumstances, it would be reasonable to discontinue mobbing of alcohol consumers, who voluntarily abstain from different kinds of social competition, under the condition that they would not violate the public order. In 2008, the difference in life expectancy between men in some West-European countries and Russia was estimated to be 20 years (Zatonski & Bhala, 2012). The role of alcohol in higher mortality cannot be denied (Razvodovsky, 2012); but its exaggeration contributes to the veiling of another

cause: limited availability of modern health care especially for aged men (Jargin, 2012), in particular, those prone to alcohol consumption.

### Conflict of interest

None declared.

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