



## “NEW LIFE” FOR RUSSIA

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*Millions of Russians are estimated to be addicted to illicit drugs. Despite the enforcement of a new drug policy, the government has not been successful in reducing the number of addicts. In 2009, 100,000 drug related deaths were reported. The Institute for Security and Development Policy has conducted a fact-finding trip to St. Petersburg to learn more about the Russian drug situation. During the stay, ISDP visited the community “New Life,” who offers assistance to drug addicts.*

Several organizations and scholars view the Russian drug policy as repressive and counterproductive. Advocates of the “harm reduction” approach accuse Russian policy-makers of disregarding the implications of drug related HIV/AIDS spread by focusing solely on the supply side of illicit drugs and ignoring demand reduction and harm reduction (i.e. needle exchange programs).

To be effective, Russian drug policy needs to curb the demand for illicit drugs and not only focus on the supply reduction side of the drug trafficking.

### The Russian Drug Problem

With limited border control and a large influx of illegal goods and immigrants, Russia has become fully integrated into the global drug market after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, Russia functioned mainly as a transit country for Afghan heroin and synthetic drugs between Europe and East Asia. The domestic consumption was mainly satisfied by local producers. Nowadays, Russian demand for drugs has tapped into imports, increasing Russia’s significance as a drug market. Conservative figures estimate that at least 2,500,000 Russians are addicted to narcotics, but the real figure is likely to be several times higher. In 1988, 8.6 crimes related to drugs per 100,000 person were reported to the authorities. That figure had risen to 123.2 in 2005.

The typical drug consumer in Russia is young, unemployed and has completed military service. In school surveys conducted in Moscow, six percent of the youths (15 and 16 year olds) admitted having used heroin at least

once. The problem is no longer limited to the major urban areas but also affects the remotest city in Siberia. In fact, by studying the prevalence of HIV, researchers have concluded that drug abuse is just as widespread in cities along the trans-Siberian railway like Yekaterinburg, Irkutsk and Vladivostok as it is in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Struggling with low birth rates and a decreasing population, it is alarming for Russia that roughly one percent of its population, equal to 1–1,5 million, are now infected with HIV. This number might seem small in comparison to some African countries south of the Sahara, but the spread of HIV in Russia is more explicitly linked with the use of drugs than in most other countries severely affected by HIV.

Russian scholars point out several factors behind the dramatic increase in drug use. Some say that the increase in drug consumption among young people reflects a desire to adapt to western lifestyle and symbolizes freedom of action. Others argue that the younger generations (especially during the 1990s) faced a double generational conflict; not only did they find their parents’ values and experiences meaningless – the whole society was shaken by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Old institutions and ideas were disliked, and violent political, economic and social changes took place in a process, which can be described as a rupture in the historical development of Russia. High unemployment, marginalization and identity confusion have made an increasing number of Russians begin to use drugs to escape their harsh living conditions.



## Russian Drug Policy

In the Soviet era, the government announced that drug abuse did not affect socialist countries. The history of Russian drug policy is therefore fairly new. Irrespective of the views of the Soviet government, drug use increased in the 1980s but was treated not as an addiction but as a mental disorder. As drug use exploded in the 1990s, there was little experience in treating addicts and in the prevention of drug abuse.

However, a new strategy focuses on countering drug abuse and trafficking (especially heroin) while linking these phenomena with the growth of transnational organized crime. In 2003 the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), which is a part of the Russian security forces, was transformed into the Federal Drug Control Service, and in 2007 the State Anti-Drug Committee was established. It consists of key officials in all regions of the Russian Federation and reports directly to the president. The fact that Russian drug policy is being enforced by officers from the security services is an indication of how the state perceives the drug problem.

Serious efforts have been taken to reduce the availability of drugs. However, preventive measures do not seem to be particularly prioritized by the Russian authorities. Poverty and social exclusion aggravates the negative effects of the lack of preventative measures. The main focus is limited to counteracting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Rehabilitation measures have improved. State-owned as well as private centers now offer treatment to drug addicts. Even if state-owned treatment centers are generally underfunded, they sometimes run below capacity. Drug addicts hesitate to approach official treatment centers because of fear of being registered as drug addicts, which can be held against them in court and decrease their chances of finding a job. Instead, those who can afford the treatment turn to private alternatives. This is well known to the authorities, who fear that without registering addicts, they would be unable to assess the situation, according to Valery Kritchvtsov, head of a regional treatment center in St. Petersburg.

The usual treatment of heroin addiction in Russia involves detoxification and a 2-4 week long period of rehabilitation with referral to outpatient follow-up. Treatment is too short to achieve any substantial results.

## The New Life - A Cure for the Russian addiction?

Sergey Matevosian, who runs the oldest Addiction and Rehabilitation Center in Russia, saw huge number of addicts in the streets during the heroin epidemic of the 1990s and decided to change the situation. In 1995, he opened the treatment center New Life, outside St. Petersburg. His philosophy is to make drug addicts drastically change their lifestyle. Patients have to abide by strict rules and commit to hard but meaningful work. The use of drugs in any form is forbidden; no alcohol, cigarettes or any form of substitute medication is allowed. Workdays are long and patients have a limited free time for their own activities. Newcomers are assigned a fellow tutor to look after and help them during their first period of drug absence. Patients are considered cured after one year at the treatment center. Some leave to go back to society while others choose to stay and work at the center tutoring newcomers.

1028 addicts have undergone the rehabilitation course since the center started. More than 700 former patients have managed to stay free from addiction. Five hundred and sixty seven have found work and 109 have stayed on to help the newcomers. Twenty spin-off centers have been started by former patients. These figures are remarkable when compared to international standards. What made New Life produce such good results?

Most activities take place in a former military base. The premises might look a bit shabby but first impressions can be deceptive. A closer look reveals an organized community of drug addicts undergoing rehabilitation busy with all kinds of work. The clients of the New Life are building new stables and harvesting crops, which the center sells at the local market. The center is also involved in rare dog breeding and other businesses.

Inside one of the buildings, the production of pavement stones is in full swing. The stones are sold to both the city of St. Petersburg and private customers and are put into place by patients themselves. A hotel intended for workers from the harbor nearby is being constructed and the center also runs a restaurant for harbor workers.

Apart from commercial activities, patients are responsible for running everyday duties such as cooking, cleaning and laundering for several hundred persons. Planning, accounting and administration is also being done by patients



under the supervision of former clients.

The entrepreneurial characteristic of the rehabilitation center is one of the secrets behind the successful treatment results of New Life. Patients dedicate themselves to hard work six days a week and also learn a profession, which is useful also after the treatment formally ends after a year.

But New Life is not about business. Profits are invested into the activities of the center and the practical needs of the patients. The staff (a majority of them former drug addicts) are working voluntarily for food and housing. Patients fulfill practical tasks in a stable social environment where they are expected to offer and receive help from others. This provides the addicts with an opportunity to break with their old habits and gives them a chance to start their lives anew.

New Life is an example of how an idealistic desire to help others combined with entrepreneurship and innovation can pave the way for successful drug rehabilitation. When it comes to actual rehabilitation, hard work, a new social community together with a complete break from drugs or substitute medicaments, seem to give good results.

## New Avenues in Russia

The example set by New Life indicates that not much funding is needed for successful drug rehabilitation. Creativity, innovation and devotion yield impressive results even in harsh conditions. Free from interference from state bureaucracy and nonprofit but still business-oriented, New Life might represent a third option of how rehabilitation facilities can be organized, apart from by the state or business. Where the success of state and business interests for combating drug abuse have so far been limited, New Life seems to have succeeded.

A decrease in drug addiction is an absolute necessity

for Russia and will also have positive implications for the wider Eurasian region. Drug abuse has not only vast negative effects for public health, it also allows organized crime to thrive in drug trafficking not only in Russia but also in neighboring countries. It would be wise for the Russian government as well as European governments to pay attention and learn from the inspiring work of New Life.

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*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

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