



## Research paper

## Effectiveness of policy changes to reduce harm from unrecorded alcohol in Russia between 2005 and now

Maria Neufeld<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Jürgen Rehm<sup>a,b,c,d,e,f</sup><sup>a</sup> Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 33 Russell Street, Toronto, ON M5S 2S1, Canada<sup>b</sup> Institute for Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, TU Dresden, Chemnitz Str. 46, 01187 Dresden, Germany<sup>c</sup> Campbell Family Mental Health Research Institute, CAMH, 250 College Street, Toronto, ON M5T 1R8, Canada<sup>d</sup> Institute of Medical Science (IMS), University of Toronto, Medical Sciences Building, 1 King's College Circle, Room 2374, Toronto, ON M5S 1A8, Canada<sup>e</sup> Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto, 250 College Street, 8th Floor, Toronto, ON M5T 1R8, Canada<sup>f</sup> Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, 155 College Street, 6th Floor, Toronto, ON M5T 3M7, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Consumption of unrecorded alcohol (alcohol that is not taxed and reflected in official statistics, but consumed as a beverage) has been identified as one of the main contributors to alcohol-attributable premature mortality in Russia. The problem was highlighted by a recent mass poisoning with surrogate alcohol occurred in the Siberian city of Irkutsk.

**Methods:** Based on key publications and legislative documents, a narrative review was undertaken about alcohol-related harm reduction policies in Russia for the period between 2005 and 2017, as well as the impact of these policies on the recorded and unrecorded alcohol consumption and alcohol market.

**Results:** Various policy measures mainly targeting availability and price of recorded and unrecorded alcohol have been introduced since 2005, which generally coincided with the decreases in alcohol-related mortality observed at that time. However, regulations on medicinal and cosmetic products have remained inconsistent providing the foundations for the continued existence of a legal industry of surrogates with broad availability and misuse.

**Conclusion:** The Russian experiences of introducing alcohol policies demonstrate that there are effective measures to reduce unrecorded alcohol consumption and attributable harm. The government's multi-level strategy of alcohol consumption and harm reduction should be pursued stringently and all the possible loop-holes for producers, sellers and distributors of illegal and/or unrecorded alcohol should be eliminated or at least critically reduced.

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## Background

The most recent mass methanol poisoning due to counterfeit surrogate alcohol killed 78 people<sup>1</sup> in the Siberian city of Irkutsk in

2016 (Lenta.ru, 2017), drawing attention once more to the problem of unrecorded alcohol consumption in Russia. Unrecorded alcohol is not reflected in official statistics, but it is consumed as a beverage nonetheless (Lachenmeier, Gmel, & Rehm, 2013). Examples for Russia include homemade vodka or wine, surrogate alcohol (i.e., alcohol, not officially produced for human consumption such as medicinal alcohol), and illegally produced or smuggled products. As the alcohol content in these products is not taxed, they tend to be cheaper than their recorded counterparts, and thus, they are more popular with individuals belonging to lower socio-economic strata (Lachenmeier, Rehm, & Gmel, 2007; Rehm et al., 2014). For Russia, unrecorded alcohol consumption has been linked to hazardous drinking patterns, alcohol use problems and social exclusion of their consumers (Bobrova et al., 2009; Neufeld, Wittchen, & Rehm, 2017; Saburova, Keenan, Bobrova, Leon, & Elbourne, 2011). Most importantly, it has been identified as one of the main contributors to both alcohol-attributable mortality and

\* Corresponding author at: Institute for Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Technische Universität Dresden, Chemnitz Str. 46, 01187 Dresden, Germany.

E-mail addresses: [neufeld.maria@gmail.com](mailto:neufeld.maria@gmail.com) (M. Neufeld), [jrehm@gmail.com](mailto:jrehm@gmail.com) (J. Rehm).

<sup>1</sup> Overall, 123 people were hospitalized with acute alcohol poisoning between the 17th and 19th of December 2016, the majority of whom were working class and lived in the same district of Irkutsk. The forensic medical investigation revealed that out of the 78 deceased, 74 died because of methanol poisoning and the rest died because of consumption of large amounts of ethanol. Apparently, the affected individuals have consumed different types of surrogates: the original ethanol-based product labelled as "Hawthorn bath lotion" and the methanol-based counterfeit. Although no new cases have occurred over the New Year festivities, as feared, several people have died in early January 2017 at the consequences of the poisoning.

premature mortality (Leon et al., 2007; Pridemore, Tomkins, Eckhardt, Kiryanov, & Saburova, 2010; Tomkins et al., 2007).

According to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2014), 24% (3.6 L of 15.1 L) of the total adult per capita alcohol consumption (pure ethanol) was unrecorded in Russia during the period of 2008–2010. Estimates from the previous years were considerably higher, ranging from 53% (7.8 L) in 1994 to 45% (6.7 L) in 2001 (Nemtsov, 2011), with suggestions of a steady decline since 2001 (Neufeld & Rehm, 2013). However, the most recent expert analysis suggests that about 33.4% (5.3 L) of Russian alcohol consumption is unrecorded (Probst, Merrey, Rylett, & Rehm, 2017). This is consistent with other recent studies indicating that unrecorded alcohol consumption remains an integral part of Russian drinking culture and everyday life (Neufeld et al., 2017; Radaev & Kotelnikova, 2016). The usual policies to reduce alcohol-induced harm, such as pricing and taxation or marketing bans, do not work in the case of unrecorded alcohol consumption (Lachenmeier, 2009). They may even encourage the consumers to shift from the recorded market to the unrecorded market (Nemtsov, 2015).

This contribution will summarize the policies implemented between 2005 and 2017, as well as current knowledge on the effect of these policies on alcohol consumption and its harms. In addition, this contribution will make specific suggestions on reducing the harms stemming from the consumption of unrecorded alcohol.

## Methods

A narrative review was undertaken on alcohol-related policies in Russia, as well as their impact on the recorded and unrecorded alcohol markets. As such, the relevant Russian alcohol-related policies and key publications concerning their effects were reviewed (Khaltourina & Korotayev, 2008, 2015; Kolosnitsyna, Sitdikov, & Khorkina, 2014; Levintova, 2007; Nemtsov, 2015; Neufeld & Rehm, 2013; Radaev & Kotelnikova, 2016; Radaev, 2015; Skorobogatov, 2014; Shield, Rylett, & Rehm, 2016) (for sources of the various policies see Web-Appendix A).

## Results

### *The most important measures introduced in 2006*

Although the Russian government had adopted important alcohol-related policies in the 1990s, its first serious attempts to regulate the alcohol market started in 2005–2006 due to the negative outcomes resulting from the abolishment of the state's monopoly on alcohol production in 1992. The legislative changes of this time period were triggered by President Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in April 2005, where he acknowledged that 40,000 people died each year from alcohol poisonings alone and that consumption of alcohol, especially cheap surrogates, was one of the biggest threats to the nation's health. The following sections focus on the legislations and their impact after 2005, while the most important alcohol-related policies for the period 2005–2017 and their specific implications are summarized in Table 1.

Starting from 2005, various amendments to the Federal Law were introduced in a step-wise manner to reduce alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms (for an overview see: Khaltourina & Korotayev, 2015; Nemtsov, 2015; Neufeld & Rehm, 2013). In 2006, a new licensing and registration procedure for alcohol producers came into effect and the minimal investment capital for producers and distributors of alcohol was raised. As a result of this new policy, many small companies were driven out of the market, whose products were most likely contributing to

unrecorded alcohol consumption (Khaltourina & Korotayev, 2015). At the same time, the centralized electronic tracking and monitoring system of alcohol (EGAIS) was implemented, along with the introduction of new excise stamps. The EGAIS system was designed to provide additional state control over the volume of production and sale of alcohol, as well as to make the production and sales processes more transparent to eliminate the illegal alcohol market.

One of the most important measures in terms of reducing unrecorded consumption was the introduction of taxes on ethanol-containing liquids in the form of the excise tax on spirits and the adoption of new, more effective (less toxic and more odorous) denaturizing additives for ethyl alcohol. Before 2006, diethyl phthalate (DEP) was one of the most commonly used denaturizers, despite that its chemical properties – colourlessness, neutral odour, toxicity and a much higher boiling point than ethanol, which made DEP very easy to separate from ethanol – characterized it unfit as a denaturizing agent. Additionally, products containing denatured alcohol (e.g. cleaning agents) had to be clearly labelled as “denatured” as per the new policy, and the usage of the term “ethyl alcohol” was no longer allowed for such products. A health warning on the danger of internal use had to be featured in a size not less than 10% of the product label. The only exception was made for cosmetic products.

The high prevalence of DEP in samples of illegal vodka from that time (Onishchenko, 2007) suggests that this compound was routinely used to legally produce large volumes of denatured non-beverage alcohol, which was then used as a raw material for further manufacturing of illegal spirits (Ljustrickij, 2006). The new legislations intervened in this semi-legal profit scheme, forcing producers of non-beverage alcohol to either denaturize their products completely or to register them with EGAIS and pay excises. Medicinal alcohols remained the only exception to the law.

Subsequently, a whole segment of pseudo-surrogates (alcoholic products officially not intended for human consumption, but in reality clearly intended and purposefully produced for consumption), such as cleaning agents, technical fluids and fire lightening products, disappeared in 2006 (Khaltourina & Korotayev, 2015). Other liquids often used as surrogates for alcoholic beverages, such as cheap colognes and cosmetic lotions, also became subject to taxation and were tracked with EGAIS, which also caused them to disappear from the market (RBK, 2007).

Also, the 2006 amendments authorized the regional legislation to introduce time restrictions on retail sale of alcoholic beverages stronger than 15%. This legislation led to varying impacts in different regions, ranging from very limited hours of sale to no restrictions at all (Kolosnitsyna et al., 2014).

### *Reorganization of the unrecorded alcohol market in 2006–2007 and its consequences*

The implementation of EGAIS, however, did not happen without complications. A general disorganization of the alcohol market occurred in 2006, since the new licensing procedure, as well as the issuing of new excise stamps, led to serious delays. This resulted in shortages of alcoholic beverages, most importantly spirits, because the new law prohibited the sale of products labelled with the old excise stamps (Nemtsov, 2015). Additional shortages were observed because The Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being (Rospotrebnadzor) had issued a complete ban on imports of wine from Moldova (spring 2006) and Georgia (summer 2006), arguing that they do not meet the Russian consumer standards. These factors caused a steep decline in the consumption of both spirits and wine, overall recorded and unrecorded alcohol consumption and fatal

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