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The Demographics of Drunkenness

By Konstantin Sonin

Speaking last month at a conference devoted to the 20th anniversary of perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev called for a major campaign to combat drunkenness. In case you've forgotten, 20 years ago Gorbachev was general secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee and chairman of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet. His first major reform -- although it was not labeled a reform at the time, of course -- was an anti-alcohol campaign. Society quickly split into opponents and reformers of the initiative: Some people disapproved of Gorbachev's goal, while others disapproved of his methods. We'll return to methods in a minute.

This time around, the reaction was far more unanimous: No one paid any attention to Gorbachev's proposal, though everyone ignored it for different reasons. People who are living in the past dislike Gorbachev so intensely that they refuse to listen to him even when he says something eminently reasonable. People who live for today don't read newspapers, and those who live for tomorrow don't drink. Yet you were wrong to ignore Gorbachev's proposal, comrades. Alcoholism is perhaps the single biggest reason for Russia's high mortality rate. And it really is astronomical: In terms of life expectancy, Russia ranks 122nd in the world, alongside North Korea and Guyana.

Economists Elizabeth Brainerd of Williams College and David Cutler of Harvard recently published a paper outlining their conclusions after years of research into the causes of Russia's high mortality rate. The most important factor in declining life expectancy, they write, is alcohol consumption. Other oft-cited factors -- the declining standard of living and deterioration of the public health system -- don't stand up under scrutiny. The public health system may be falling apart, but the indicators that should react most dramatically to worsening conditions, such as the number of mothers who die in childbirth or the use of medications, have changed little.

But there has been an upsurge in mortality resulting from so-called "external causes" -- homicide, suicide and accidents. The situation was bad enough during the Soviet era, when male mortality from external causes was three times higher than in Western Europe, and female mortality was twice as high. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the situation has become far worse. The research carried out by Brainerd and Cutler shows that our passion for alcohol increases our likelihood of death from external causes by four times. On the whole, Gorbachev is right: We have a problem, and we need to tackle it.

What lessons can we learn from his anti-alcohol campaign 20 years ago? That this problem is extremely difficult to solve "from above." Ideally, the impetus for change should come from below. In the United States, for example, nearly one-fourth of all counties are "dry," meaning that even for a beer you have to go elsewhere. In Chicago, residents can vote to make their individual neighborhoods dry. Even before President Vladimir Putin's reforms, local democracy in Russia was in an embryonic state, to put it mildly, and his push to take us "back to the U.S.S.R." doesn't bode well for the future. On the other hand, a new, centralized anti-alcohol campaign would be better than nothing. After all, the period from 1985 to 1987 did see a dramatic improvement in important demographic indicators. It's time to take a sober look at the facts.

Konstantin Sonin, a professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR, wrote this column for Vedomosti.