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Researchers blame Russian drinking on \$3 vodka

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Researchers and activists on Tuesday warned that low taxes on vodka -- which are three times less than in the Baltic states -- have encouraged heavy drinking among Russians, cutting their average life expectancy by 10 years.

The government-approved minimum retail price for a half-liter bottle of vodka is currently 89 rubles (\$3), considerably lower than in Europe, and about two-thirds of deaths in car accidents in Russia are alcohol-related.

New Economic School (NES) has recently compiled a research based on data by a governmental agency which surveyed 10,000 people across Russia between 1994 and 2008.

Data shows that heavy drinking cuts average life expectancy in Russia by up to 10 years, NES Professor Irina Denisova told a news conference.

Recent government statistics have indicated that as much as 18 liters of alcohol per capita is consumed in Russia every year. Many scientists gave little credence to the figures after the government failed to provide explanation for the estimate.

Alexander Nemtsov, a department chief at the Moscow Research Institute of Psychiatry, who believes that the true figure of alcohol consumption is closer to 15 liters a year, insisted that the government has set too ambitious plans when it set out to cut consumption to 8 liters within the next ten years.

"It is impossible to drastically cut consumption in the next 15-20 years in the current social and political conditions and with the level of poverty we have," Nemtsov said.

While 2 to 5 percent of men are believed to be alcoholics in Russia, as much as 40 percent of men drink excessively.

Russia's northern European neighbors Sweden, Finland and Norway have managed to drastically cut alcohol consumption over the past decades by hiking excise duties and limiting alcohol sales.

Russia's parliament has recently raised excise duties on beer but left vodka duties almost unchanged. While excise duties for one liter of alcohol in neighboring Baltic states average euro12 (\$16.2), they are less than euro4.5 in Russia.

Duma deputy Vladimir Medinskiy, a supporter of higher vodka prices, insists that an abrupt rise in vodka taxes will be highly unpopular, and the government is not to blame for dragging their feet.

"People are against it," he said. "There is only one thing I can reproach authorities with -- and that's the lack of political will in taking a highly unpopular decision."

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