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The anti-alcohol campaign in the USSR—a dubious success

The anti-alcohol campaign launched in 1984 tried to accomplish a profound social change by partial prohibition. Drunkenness was driven underground, but illegal distillation made up the shortfall in supplies, and alcoholism has not declined.

Nearly five years have elapsed since the start of reforms aimed at reducing alcohol consumption in the USSR. In the first year there was a sense of euphoria—intoxication by sobriety. It looked as though another couple of steps forward, another couple of liquor shops closed, would mark the advent of the universal sobriety so much desired. That was the time when we were all dominated by the naïve notion that the adoption of an important state decision would inevitably lead to a quick solution of the problem. This was based on wishful thinking rather than a realistic assessment of the facts. Social ailments of this nature, which have taken root over the decades in everyday life and become an integral part of popular demand and value judgements, are not only vital and persistent but ever capable of affecting new parts of the social organism.

In the struggle against drunkenness serious difficulties and new acute problems have emerged indicating that the methods being used need to be changed, and that they should not simply be made tougher.

There are no easy ways of solving very complicated social problems. What we need now is a quiet assessment of results and an equally quiet assessment of newly-emerged problems followed by thoroughly considered proposals for further action. We must draw a line down a sheet of paper and on one side put a list of achievements and on the other the unsolved tasks and new problems. Then we must sum it all up and say: “What do we do next?”

The reforms in the summer of 1985 were necessary — there is not a shadow of doubt about that — although it has been suggested that they might have been implemented in a different way. There are two major positive results of the reforms: firstly it was demonstrated that with active involvement drunkenness can be successfully curbed; secondly people came to realize what a great thing it was to have no drunks lying in the

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In Focus: Alcohol

streets. A large number of people learned not to drink at their place of work, even collectively, and to avoid alcohol at drinking parties with bosses and eminent guests.

The urgency of the struggle against drunkenness and alcoholism is still as pressing today as it was before the reforms were introduced. Alcohol consumption is again becoming alarming. Basic indices employed to take stock of alcohol consumption testify to this unhappy trend.

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In 1984 (i.e., on the eve of the reform) the production of liquor in the country amounted to 8.36 litres of pure alcohol per head of the population. Only 3.36 litres per person were distilled in 1987—a fall of 60% in 3 years. However, if one takes into account the privately distilled illegal liquor, the consumption of alcohol per caput is now at the level of late 1984 or early 1985 according to approximate data provided by most researchers (1). The number of registered alcohol addicts in the USSR amounted to 4 million in 1986, or 15 people per 1000, and medical detoxication facilities provided services to around 9 million people, 33 per 1000 (2). At the end of 1988 the number of alcoholics and of those undergoing detoxication remained at approximately the same level. The share of vodka in the range of state-distilled beverages amounts to 50% and, taking into account the amount of illegally distilled liquor consumed, the share of strong alcoholic liquors, (i.e., the most socially hazardous ones) amounts to 70–80%. It appears that the USSR is among the world’s leaders in the consumption of strong liquor.

Previous social blemishes are still there to this day: schoolchild alcoholics, growing female alcoholism, younger drinkers. Among the new problems one can cite: a lake of illegally distilled liquor, a fearsome rise in drug addiction and toxicomania, as well as a growing number of poisonings by alcohol substitutes. Alarming, abandoning the streets, drunkenness is now lurking in home life, in families, in the privacy of apartments.

“Innovative” control measures that have already failed in other countries—such as alcohol coupons, and zones and months of sobriety—have had undesirable repercussions without being in the least effective. Long queues at liquor shops have not made the road to sobriety any shorter; instead they have further aggravated the situation and increased the amount of alcohol consumed.

What are the root causes of these difficulties? This is a question with no easy answers in sight. Presumably the analysis of root causes is of interest to both home and foreign researchers. We cannot undertake to provide an exhaustive explanation of the existing situation, only to outline some possibilities.

The alcohol consumption reform launched in the USSR hinged on bans and restrictions, on administrative and prohibitive measures. But drunkenness would not yield to administrative measures and legal penalties no matter how numerous and severe they were and how zealously enforced. For many people the urge to drink is so pressing that it is given preference to all other demands. It is extremely difficult to eliminate this urge or to substitute for it. Bans, penalties, and administrative rebukes may have an
instant impact but it is one that passes just as quickly. Such methods have no effect on the causes of alcoholism.

An all-out cavalry assault was ordered instead of a persistent siege, winning the territory step by step. The authorities totally disregarded the fact that restrictions on alcohol consumption can only be successful when they are supported by a majority of the population.

The package of restrictions was aimed at curbing further uncontrollable alcohol consumption and at containing excesses. For these reasons the distilling and sale of alcohol were the first to be reduced. Both were gradually scaled down: to 90%, 80%, 70%—but not to zero because the legislation did not stipulate a complete prohibition. The production and sale of alcohol continued as before although on a smaller scale.

That meant that in practice the emphasis was placed on a more moderate consumption of alcohol, although this had never been declared. At the same time lip-service was given to the goal of complete eradication, and attempts were made (alas with little effect) to substantiate these words with practical initiatives. In other words, an essentially moderate policy was run under the extremist slogan of a struggle for absolute sobriety. Such discord between the essence of the policy and the spirit of the anti-alcohol propaganda has led to extremely undesirable consequences.

Equally contradictory were the results of work at a later stage. The worst manifestations of drunkenness and workshop drinking plummeted and were even eliminated in some cases. This constituted a great victory over the most extreme and inadmissible consequences of alcohol consumption. But at the same time the verbal struggle for sobriety lost momentum and by 1987 had collapsed completely. For another year the media babbled sobriety slogans and then gave up.

This was no accident. Most of the adult population were unprepared for the extreme idea of complete sobriety and quietly but firmly opposed it, and of course there can be no sobriety without the support and understanding of the population.

There is another important contradiction between the general policy of perestroika and glasnost, which is in keeping with present-day social development and the aspirations of the sound part of the population, and the miserable style of many of the anti-alcohol initiatives, with their primitive and insulting wording. Perestroika is based on reasoned argument, sensible compromises, and a flexible approach to problems, on sincerity and openness in discussing issues. It appeals to the maturity, responsibility, and dignity of educated and intelligent people. In contrast, the anti-alcohol propaganda and such initiatives as the artificial scarcity of alcohol are based on outdated approaches to management and old-fashioned notions of social life, people, vocabulary, and style. In short they are in direct opposition to the essence and spirit of perestroika.

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The launching of perestroika coincided with the beginning of the alcohol consumption reform. The reduction of alcoholism is a constituent part of higher social policy, but the campaign came to be implemented by
outdated methods — formerly so familiar. *Ad hoc* policy-making, high-handed actions, red tape, window-dressing, and disregard of public opinion were reported in many areas in the process of implementation.

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Another serious fault consisted in the tendency to regard everyone who consumed alcohol as a depraved person. The ordinary consumer of alcohol is not a drunkard. But the managers of the anti-alcohol campaign do not differentiate. Indeed, they consider the moderate drinker more dangerous on the assumption that the evil starts with the first glass. This ostensibly faultless position will frustrate any anti-alcohol effort. If you do not distinguish between various types of alcohol consumer, there is no chance to understand the problem and achieve tangible results. Lawyers distinguish between hooliganism and a banal case of disrespect. Alcohol consumption equally calls for a distinction to be made between its various type-groups in order to choose corresponding types of “treatment”.

The excessive powers vested in the All-Union Society for the Struggle for Sobriety and the immoderate swelling of its ranks were also serious faults. In our opinion the major flaw in the regulations of the society is the article requiring all members to be teetotallers.

Among individual miscalculations were the unwarranted reduction in the amount of alcohol distilled (which created long queues outside liquor shops), the excessive price rises, the unwarranted sales cuts, and the barbarous destruction of vineyards. All that this amounted to was window-dressing, presenting departments in a good light while virtually inviting alternative ways of meeting the demand for alcohol. Illegal liquor and drugs are the most harmful of these alternatives, making nonsense of the formal achievements.

References