

Narcotics and Nationalism: Russian Drug Policies and Futures

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Improving Global Drug Policy: Comparative Perspectives and UNGASS 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

- With 6 percent of the population using drugs, Russia is suffering from serious and problematic drug consumption and a growing public health crisis.
- The Kremlin regards the drug challenge as a nationalist, securitized, and moral problem. Drug addiction is considered a moral deficiency rather than a medical issue, which reinforces the Russian government's predilection for a punitive approach.
- Extensive availability of heroin from Afghanistan is particularly problematic. Russia is both a transshipment and a destination country for Afghanistan's opiates.
- Framed as a security threat, the influx of Afghan heroin is viewed at best as a Western failure and at worst as a malign attempt to damage Russia. Domestically, the Russian government adopts a law enforcement model toward traffickers and users alike, rather than harm reduction, drug prevention, and treatment models.
- Even so, efforts to address drug trafficking and consumption in Russia have been undermined or warped by the lack of resourcing, political will, and turf wars among Russian security agencies. Russia's growing economic problems also necessitate liquidity on the part of many financial institutions, encouraging them to turn a blind eye to dirty money.

Policy Recommendations

- Russia needs to adopt a more inclusive and comprehensive strategy that balances interdiction and law enforcement with treatment, prevention, and harm reduction methods.
- Russia needs to engage local governments, communities, and non-governmental organizations, as well as foreign partners.
- Law enforcement cooperation must not remain hostage to geopolitical rivalries. Afghanistan's drug policy needs to encourage effective efforts to sustainably reduce production rather than be used as a means for asserting regional hegemony.

Introduction

The intertwined economic, political, and social crises of Russia's "wild '90s"—after the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1992—combined with the new freedoms of cross-border trade and travel led to an explosion in drug use and trafficking. There was a more than nine-fold increase in the number of addicts in the first 18 years of post-Soviet Russia.¹ Coinciding with Russia's aging and unhealthy population and compounding its demographic crisis, this also led to a massive increase in associated problems such as the spread of hepatitis, drug-resistant tuberculosis (TB), HIV, and AIDS—the rate of new HIV infection doubled every six to twelve months between 1995 and 2001.² As the country began to stabilize at the end of the decade, so, too, did its drug problem. However, since then, the problem has again started to become increasingly serious: by the beginning of 2014, an estimated 1.3 million Russians had HIV, for example, largely contracted through contaminated needles.³

Trends: A Gathering Storm

According to official figures, almost 6 percent of the total population, or some 8.5 million people, are drug addicts or regular users. Although the scale of increase is moderate, the key challenges appear to be the growing proportion of users becoming addicts and the use of harder and more dangerous narcotics. Some 90 percent use heroin at least part of the time, making Russia the world's leading heroin-using nation per capita; and highly-dangerous drugs such as krokodil (desomorphine) are also making considerable headway, with consequent effects on mortality.⁴

Russia is increasingly a transit as well as consumer country for Afghan heroin. Around a third of Afghan heroin now travels along the so-called "Northern Route"—really a collection of numerous routes, braided together—into and through Russia.⁵ This is not only leading to greater domestic use, creating a \$6 billion industry, it is also strengthening inter-regional international trafficking networks.⁶ Indeed, routes serving Europe and even North America could be augmented with additional flows to supply a growing Chinese market. In the words of Viktor Ivanov, head of Russia's Federal Anti-Narcotics Service (FSKN), "Afghan drug traffic is like a tsunami constantly breaking over Russia—we are sinking in it."⁷

Obviously, other illegal drugs are also in use, and what successes there have been to limit the trade in heroin have also contributed to the popularity of other narcotics, including krokodil, marijuana, khanka (an opiate produced from poppy straw), vint (homemade amphetamines), and medical pharmaceuticals. Furthermore, there is a growing market for synthetic drugs, which has also sparked the rise of a domestic production capacity, still largely in small-scale "kitchen labs." After all, Russia's underworld narcotics industry has also been facilitated by the way the country's integration into global financial systems and trade networks has outpaced its control mechanism's ability to prevent smuggling and the flow of drug profits.

Finally, although efforts are being made to improve the professionalism and honesty of Russian law enforcement, the relatively elite status of the anti-narcotics agents in both the FSKN and other police

¹ U.S. Department of State, *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2013), <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/index.htm>.

² *Rehabilitation Required: Russia's Human Rights Obligation to Provide Evidence-Based Drug Dependence Treatment* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007), 12, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia1107webwcover.pdf>.

³ "Russian HIV Surge Shows Scourge Sochi Swagger Can't Mask," *Bloomberg News*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-01-13/russian-hiv-surge-shows-scourge-sochi-games-swagger-can-t-mask.html>.

⁴ "Over 8 Mln Russians Are Drug Addicts – Govt. Report," *RIA-Novosti*, September 17, 2013, <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20130917/183511725/Over-8-Mln-Russians-Are-Drug-Addicts--Govt-Report.html>.

⁵ Mark Galeotti, "Northern Exposure Afghan Heroin Trafficking Through Central Asia," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (2012): 7-12.

⁶ "Over 8 Mln Russians Are Drug Addicts – Govt. Report," *RIA-Novosti*.

⁷ Alexander Yakovenko, "Poppy: The Growing Afghan Threat," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 13, 2013, http://rbth.com/international/2013/05/13/poppy_the_growing_afghan_threat_25927.html.

agencies—and the scale of potential criminal profits to be made—has allowed them to remain largely untouched by reforms. Endemic corruption thus remains a serious problem, undermining efforts to control trafficking networks.

Key Harms and Threats

Russia remains an essentially strong and functional state—albeit with distinct dysfunctions and looming political and economic problems—and as such the current weight of the drug problem is bearable and not meaningfully impacting the Kremlin's capacity to govern. However, the present and future harms for Russia as a state and Russians as a people are several and serious.

The first is increasing mortality. Although the official figures for some time held at 30,000–40,000 drug-related deaths, in 2013 these shot up to 100,000.⁸ This sharp increase—up 270 percent from 2012's numbers—to a considerable extent probably reflected the release of more accurate and honest data rather than the actual scale of the increase. Nonetheless, the underlying trend continues to rise steadily, with a particular and alarming continued increase in HIV infections largely contracted through needle-sharing, as well as in the terrible damage caused by the spread of krokodil, used by an estimated 100,000 addicts, which ultimately rots users' skin away.⁹ With some 70 percent of the inmates in Russian prisons being drug users, they are also especially prone to the resistant strains of TB, which are endemic within the corrections system.¹⁰

Beyond this, the profits from drug trafficking are reshaping and destabilizing the national underworld. Reporting to President Vladimir Putin, Ivanov puts a

brave face on the situation. In 2013, he announced the FSKN's successes with impressive-sounding figures:

Working together with law enforcement agencies, we investigated around 250,000 drug trafficking cases and brought criminal charges against more than 100,000 people. We liquidated around 1,100 criminal groups and organizations and investigated 250 drug-related money laundering cases.¹¹

However, the truth on the ground is that this has had no appreciable impact on the underworld or the drug supply. Gangs able to control or “tax” the Afghan heroin trails are thus becoming increasingly powerful—or else facing challenges from larger groups eager to gain access to this source of revenue. This is leading to increasingly overt violence and the potential for yet more serious inter-gang conflicts.¹²

Russia's underworld is a complex one, characterized primarily by smaller local or specialized groups associated into regional, national, or even transnational networks. These networks, of which there are—depending on how they are counted—anywhere from 10–14 in Russia, facilitate connections, provide a degree of reliability and trust in transactions between parties, and regulate disputes. Drug-trafficking gangs are also often local drug-dealing gangs, especially when involved in the heroin industry. They will typically handle a single stage in the through-flow of heroin to Western Europe—the most lucrative market—and are paid for their role with a proportion of the shipment, which they then sell locally. As such, these local gangs tend to be involved in a wide range of local crimes, compared with the relative handful of facilitators who assemble these chains of local partners and who tend to specialize in this activity.

⁸ “Over 8 Mln Russians Are Drug Addicts – Govt. Report,” *RIA-Novosti*.

⁹ Shaun Walker, “Krokodil: The Drug That Eats Junkies,” *The Independent* (UK), June 22, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/krokodil-the-drug-that-eats-junkies-2300787.html>.

¹⁰ Alexander Marshall, *From Drug War to Culture War: Russia's Growing Role in the Global Drug Debate*, Global Drug Policy Observatory, Policy Brief, no. 5 (July 2014), <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/gdpo/files/GDPO%20Russia%20Article-1.pdf>.

¹¹ “Working meeting with Director of the Federal Drug Control Service Viktor Ivanov,” Presidential Executive Office website, March 11, 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5097>.

¹² Mark Galeotti, “Return of Mob Rule - The Resurgence of Gangsterism in Russia,” *Jane's Intelligence Review* (2013): 44–49.

The profits made through drug trafficking also contribute to the continuing corruption of law enforcement agencies, courts, and local authorities in key transit regions and cities. Indeed, not only are many gangs associated with, or paying off, the local police, Federal Security Service (FSB), or FSKN, there are also elements within the security apparatus that are directly involved. Some criminals within the military, for example, take advantage of both the presence of the Russian-led 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan, atop key smuggling routes, and also military convoys' immunity to regular Russian customs controls, to smuggle Afghan heroin into the country. However, this is a problem that has declined since the 1990s, when morale and salaries were both at rock bottom.

Just as seriously, the country's financial system is heavily and increasingly interpenetrated by narcotics profits that—especially if the present financial sanctions regime continues—become indispensable for liquidity. Despite the closure of Master Bank in 2013, a medium-sized Russian bank charged with knowingly laundering drug money for several years, there is still a widespread belief within both the Russian and international financial control communities that most such laundries continue unabated.

More generally, Russia's borders, porous at the best of times, are increasingly hard to control given the level of corruption, fuelled by the narcotics business. This has wider implications for the ability of other illegal actors to freely cross in and out of Russia, from illegal migrants to terrorist couriers. Ivanov has admitted that "Russia has a state border mechanism, but its efficiency in stopping drugs from flowing into the country is extremely low—that is, we have the border but it does not work as a mechanism to suppress contraband."¹³

Drug Policies: Political, Not Practical

Despite these numerous reasons for concern and the need for serious and coherent responses, Russian drug policies are mostly retrograde, politicized, and, to date, largely ineffective. To a considerable extent, this is because they are rooted less in the practical needs of the moment and more so in a politicized narrative. Pushed by the FSKN for its own political reasons, this narrative sees the drug challenge as a nationalist and securitized one.¹⁴ As a result, there has in recent years been a partial retreat from Western models of rehabilitation and public education and a move toward a reliance on incarceration and interdiction. For example, in 2004 the government took a step away from earlier, draconian approaches, and decriminalized possession of small amounts of drugs, incidentally leading to the release of thousands of drug users from overcrowded prisons. In 2006, though, these reforms were partially rolled back, largely because of pressure from the police, who claimed that they were encouraging a broader criminalization of society: carrying amounts that previously would have led to misdemeanor charges again became criminal felonies.¹⁵

The nationalist aspect of the Russian government's thinking is dominated by the in- and through-flow of Afghan heroin. This is considered a threat created by Western actions and, to some, one generated or perpetuated knowingly in order to pose a threat to Russia. Ivanov pointedly drew a direct link when he said, "Over the past 14 years, since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghan heroin has killed more than one million people in Eurasia, including at least half a million Russian citizens."¹⁶ More broadly, growing domestic narcotics is presented in some influential quarters as reflecting an erosion of national and cultural values, stemming largely from foreign influences.¹⁷

¹³ "Afghan Drugs Inundate Russia - Federal Drug Control Service," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 13, 2013, http://rbth.com/news/2013/09/13/afghan_drugs_inundate_russia_-_federal_drug_control_service_29790.html.

¹⁴ Marshall, *From Drug War to Culture War: Russia's Growing Role in the Global Drug Debate*.

¹⁵ *Rehabilitation Required*, 14-15.

¹⁶ "Afghan Heroin Has 'Killed' At Least 500,000 Russians Since 2000 - Drug Watchdog Head," *Interfax*, May 15, 2014, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=505009>.

¹⁷ Marshall, *From Drug War to Culture War: Russia's Growing Role in the Global Drug Debate*.

In parallel, there is a securitized perspective, especially since President Putin declared narcotics a “national security threat” in 2002. This is expressed primarily in concern over the actual and potential impact on organized crime, regional terrorism, insurgency (primarily in Central Asia and the Caucasus), and demographics. In Ivanov’s words:

I must say that the scale of narcotic drugs production in Afghanistan, which has surged up since the expansion of NATO’s military activities in the region, has long become a dominating factor for political destabilization in Russia and for the destruction of its economic potential.¹⁸

The result has been a clear preference for interdiction and enforcement measures over demand reduction. The Kremlin, for example, stepped heavily on efforts to start a debate about decriminalizing “soft drugs” and has largely allowed the security and law enforcement community to mute or ignore the voices of the medical, social work, and similar stake-holding communities. The Ministry of Health, in particular, has been largely sidelined by the FSKN and other agencies with less interest and stake in rehabilitation and demand reduction efforts.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the FSKN was put in charge of formulating an inter-agency plan for creating rehabilitation facilities, despite the expression of concerns on the part of advocacy and treatment groups that it lacked the interest and expertise for this role—and would deter addicts from coming forward.²⁰

The role of the FSKN in policy, as opposed to enforcement, has proven crucial and often deeply unhelpful. This is a relatively young agency, formed in 2004, and one that has frequently found itself embroiled in vicious behind-the-scenes turf wars with other, gen-

erally more powerful, security agencies. In 2007, for example, an investigation of corruption surrounding the *Tri Kita* (Three Whales) furniture business led to a clash with the Federal Security Service. It escalated to the point where the FSB arrested three FSKN generals, and the FSKN’s erstwhile director, Viktor Cherkesov, claimed that this was part of a bid to seize control of his agency as a whole (and, it was implied, control over the drug trade itself).²¹ It eventually required Putin to personally step in to settle this turf war, and shortly thereafter Cherkesov paid the price for challenging the FSB—Putin’s old service—and doing so publicly, and was dismissed.²² Desperate to establish and extend its role in an environment of sharp-elbowed struggles between the security agencies, the FSKN has become unprepared to cooperate even with the regular police and other agencies, as well as allowed its policies to reflect Kremlin orthodoxy at every turn.

Both the nationalist and securitized aspects of the Kremlin’s perspective have also left law-enforcement cooperation with the West hostage to the vicissitudes of wider political relations. After the British government expressed its suspicions that Russians were behind the murder of émigré and FSB defector Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, for example, Anglo-Russian police cooperation all but ceased. More recently, the Western response to Russia’s seizure of Crimea and instigation of a south-eastern Ukrainian insurrection in 2014 has again had a serious impact on intelligence sharing and joint operations. Although Russian gangs do not play a major role in the European underworld, especially in the south, they are increasingly important wholesale suppliers of narcotics (as well as of other criminal goods and services, from money laundering to counterfeit goods), and so this has a serious impact on wider policing efforts.

¹⁸ “Three Killed, Pipeline on Fire in Ukraine’s Town Near Donetsk,” *ITAR-Tass*, August 19, 2014, <http://tass.ru/en/world/745714>.

¹⁹ See, for example, Richard Elovich and Ernest Drucker, “On Drug Treatment and Social Control: Russian Narcology’s Great Leap Backwards,” *Harm Reduction Journal* 5, no. 23 (2008), doi: [10.1186/1477-7517-5-23](https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7517-5-23).

²⁰ Alison Quinn, “No Rehab for Russia’s Drug Addicts,” *Moscow Times*, June 25, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/no-rehab-for-russia-s-drug-addicts/502524.html>.

²¹ Viktor Cherkesov, “Nel’zya dopustit’ chto by voiny prevratilis’ v torgovtsev,” *Kommersant*, October 9, 2007; and “Arrests Hint at Struggle for Power After Putin,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/10/world/europe/10iht-russia.4.7837872.html?_r=0.

²² Daniil Kotsyubinsky, “The Writing on the Wall?” *oDR*, November 5, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/daniil-kotsyubinsky/writing-on-wall>.

Coercion and Criminalization

As a result, the emphasis is very much on increasingly harsh punishments, militarized policing, and efforts to destroy supplies, although even this is often selective, with drugs groups that are connected to or paying off the authorities able to operate with considerable impunity. Meanwhile, the FSKN has transferred resources from its outreach budget to create specialist SWAT teams and has lobbied for the use of chemicals to destroy opium crops in Afghanistan, without concern for creating alternative livelihoods. Although in late 2014 the FSKN stepped back from its outspoken support for eradication efforts in Afghanistan, it instead shifted its emphasis onto interdiction in Central Asia—in essence hoping to outsource the challenge to its regional allies, especially through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes not just Russia, but also Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.²³

Conversely, a low priority has been placed on effective treatment, prevention, and harm reduction efforts.²⁴ While short-term detox treatments are available, the same cannot be said about support for lasting rehabilitation.²⁵ According to Diederik Lohman, senior researcher in Human Rights Watch's HIV/AIDS and Human Rights Program, "The lack of effective drug addiction treatment in Russia means that drug users who want to break their addiction cannot, and are condemned to a life of continued drug use."²⁶ In 2007, their researchers found rehabilitation programs available in state clinics in only a third of Russia's regions; anecdotal evidence suggests that by early 2014, fewer than half still offered these services.²⁷ Similarly,

while a new law signed in 2013 allows addicts to be forcibly detained for up to 30 days simply for being addicts, the federal government has still not allocated the funds to cover any meaningful rehabilitation program while they are in detention.²⁸ Likewise, methadone and buprenorphine, widely used around the world as controlled replacement drugs for heroin addicts—and recommended for that use by the World Health Organization—remain banned in Russia. In Crimea, following the March 2014 Russian annexation, this even led to some 800 addicts whom the Ukrainian authorities had placed on methadone programs being denied further treatment. As of June 2014, an estimated 20 had died from overdoses.²⁹

Too often, the government has also proven resistant to allowing other agencies from playing a role in policy or practice. Efforts at prevention and harm reduction by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local authorities too often become political issues and are frequently (though not always) deliberately marginalized or demonized by central government. As a result, they lack coherence and, frequently, access to earmarked national funds. For example, Evgeni Roizman, a charismatic and outspoken campaigner from Ekaterinburg (where he has since been elected as mayor) faced constant pressure on his City Without Drugs initiative.³⁰ Although City Without Drugs uses controversial methods—including chaining up addicts to force them to go through detoxification cold turkey—nonetheless the impetus for the campaigns against it appears to have been to marginalize Roizman rather than to genuinely complain about his methods, especially as in many ways they were not that different from the new powers of the police to detain addicts for enforced detoxification.

²³ John Daly, "Afghanistan's Thriving Drug Trade Worries Neighbours," *Silk Road Reporters*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2014/12/15/afghanistan-drug-trade-neighbours/>.

²⁴ Elizabeth Rigbey, "Drug Addiction: Not Quite as Simple as Russia v the West," *oDR*, November 16, 2009, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/content/drug-addiction-not-quite-as-simple-as-russia-v-west>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ "Russia: Drug Addiction Treatment Requires Reform," Human Rights Watch, last modified November 8, 2007, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/11/07/russia-drug-addiction-treatment-requires-reform>.

²⁷ *Rehabilitation Required*, 52; Russian Ministry of Health Specialist, interview by author, February 2014.

²⁸ Quinn, "No Rehab for Russia's Drug Addicts."

²⁹ Oleksiy Arunyan, "Crimea's Methadone Ban Hitting Rehab Patients Hard," *RFE/RL*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/crimeas-methadone-ban-hitting-rehab-patients-hard/25429665.html>; and Michel Kazatchkine, "Russia's Ban on Methadone for Drug Users in Crimea Will Worsen the HIV/AIDS Epidemic and Risk Public Health," *British Medical Journal* 348 (May 2014), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g3118>. *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 348, May 2014, <http://www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g3118.full.pdf+html>.

³⁰ See, for example, Mansur Mirovalev, "Russian Anti-Drugs Crusader Under Growing Pressure," *Associated Press*, November 13, 2012, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/russian-anti-drugs-crusader-under-growing-pressure>.

Indeed, it was only in 2013 that NGOs focusing on rehabilitating addicts were added to the list of socially-oriented organizations eligible for state support.³¹ Perhaps the only real exception is the Russian Orthodox Church, thanks to its privileged position in society and close relationship with Putin. However, the 40 rehabilitation centers it runs are both manifestly inadequate to the demand and also subject to criticism for their faith-based regimes and lack of effectiveness.³²

The influence of the FSKN and the emphasis on interdiction has even had a baleful influence on the level of academic research within Russia on the problem. While there are capable researchers and some good-quality work, overall there is also much that lags behind global levels of scholarship, and even the best studies too rarely impact policy. This is another area in which the marginalization of the Ministry of Health, which supports much of the best research, has been problematic.

What is to be Done?

There is an urgent need for the Russian government not only to devote more economic and political resources to the problem but also to move away from its nationalist and securitized perspective. This will require:

- More informed and pluralistic decision-making processes;
- A greater emphasis on effective, evidence and best-practices-based treatment, rehabilitation, prevention, and harm reduction approaches rather than a focus on interdiction and prosecution of users;

- A willingness to incorporate local governments, communities, and NGOs as active partners rather than insisting on centralized control or the involvement of a handful of approved partners such as the Russian Orthodox Church;
- Greater cooperation between law-enforcement agencies and also law enforcement and public health bodies;
- Uncoupling law enforcement cooperation from wider geopolitical rivalries; and
- Embracing joint efforts over Afghanistan with the West and other interested parties, such as China, to press for and support long-term efforts to reduce the scope of drug producers.

In fairness, many of these issues have been recognized in the State Anti-Narcotics Policy Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020, adopted in 2010.³³ This document seeks to create a coherent approach to rehabilitation and harm reduction, as well as strengthen enforcement measures. As stated in the document, “The main goal of the Strategy is the substantial reduction of illicit trade and non-medical use of drugs, [as well as the] impact of illicit trade on the safety and health of the person, the society, and the state.”³⁴ The problem is that too many of the document’s commitments remain essentially aspirational, and those which have been supported with political will—and funds—tend to be those relating to enforcement and interdiction. A national addicts’ rehabilitation program was only established in 2012 (to cover the period to 2020), and was initially to be supported by 179 billion rubles (\$5.4 billion) in federal funds.³⁵ However, not only did the program exclude aspects which in most countries would be considered routine, such as anonymity for those seeking help, but disagreements over detail and resistance from the Finance Ministry have prevented most disbursements to date.³⁶

³¹ “Over 8 Mln Russians Are Drug Addicts – Govt. Report,” *RIA-Novosti*.

³² U.S. Department of State, *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*.

³³ “State Antidrug Policy Strategy,” <http://stratgap.ru/pages/strategy/3662/4434/4437/index.shtml>.

³⁴ *State Anti-Narcotics Strategy Policy of the Russian Federation to 2020*, section II, paragraph 3 (2010), <http://fskn.gov.ru/pages/gak/4605/4604/strategy/index.shtml>.

³⁵ Denis Antonov, “FSKN i reabilitatsiya narkozavisimykh,” Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice, September 17, 2013, <http://rylkov-fond.org/blog/health-care/rehabilitation/avtonomov/>.

³⁶ “В российском бюджете не нашлось денег на реабилитацию наркоманов,” *Slon*, August 19, 2014, <http://slon.ru/fast/russia/fskn-pozhalovalas-na-otsutstvie-deneg-na-reabilitatsiyu-narkomanov-1144856.xhtml>.

Central to this challenge is the attitude of the Kremlin. Institutions such as the FSKN have not been able to hijack drug policy and steer it towards exclusively coercive strategies simply because of their political skills. Rather, they were successful in leveraging those skills because their approach fit more closely with the instincts of President Putin and his closest allies and advisors. His personal views and political persona lead him to consider drug use a moral failing, something encouraged by the Russian Orthodox Church's skepticism about "harm reduction" approaches that appear to condone immoral behaviors.³⁷ This also seems to legitimize the often-brutal treatment of drug users by the police.³⁸ Thus, genuine reform will need to start with a change in attitudes in the Kremlin, something that appears for the moment highly unlikely.

An UNGASS Half-Empty

While the Russian government has historically tended to be eager to appear to be a "good citizen" in United Nations (UN) endeavors—not least to be able to influence the outcome and shield itself from commitments it may find irksome—and intends to use the 2016 Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS 2016) to push (once again) its enforcement strategy for Afghanistan, overall there appears to be little substantive enthusiasm and low expectations for UNGASS 2016.

Speaking to the 2013 International Drug Enforcement Conference, Putin said, "Russia supports the UN's central coordinating role in combating drug trafficking. The United Nations has a tremendously important part to play, a part that only this universal

organization is capable of playing."³⁹ Likewise, Andrey Kelin, Russia's permanent representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Permanent Council said, "We believe that the international community should really concert its efforts to combat Afghan drug trafficking, with the United Nations playing a central and coordinating role."⁴⁰ Nonetheless, behind these positive words, there is a growing suspicion on the part of Putin and his inner circle of the current international regimes. They regard them as on the one hand too often ineffective, and on the other, Western-dominated and prone to infringe on Russian sovereignty. Beyond the general skepticism of the international organization, there appears a largely unspoken belief that Western notions of demand reduction and rehabilitation reflect and encourage "moral degeneration." Interviewed in advance of UNGASS 2016, Ivanov delivered an undiplomatic rebuff to those advocating decriminalizing some narcotics, suggesting that they "fly on airplanes where the pilot used drugs, and lie down on the operating table of the surgeon who smoked marijuana."⁴¹

Meanwhile, the Kremlin's desire to maintain and extent its hegemony within the post-Soviet states (sometimes still known within Russia as the "Near Abroad"), especially in Central Asia, renders it suspicious of multinational initiatives which would bring Western influence into the region. Although there is a history of limited joint ventures, Moscow has become increasingly skeptical of anything that would seem to legitimate a continued U.S. role in the region or else seem to associate it too closely with Washington. In 2012, for example, it rebuffed the United States when Washington proposed an initiative for joint activity against Afghan heroin trafficking, with

³⁷ Richard Cimino, "Religion and Health: Russian Orthodox HIV and Drug Treatment Programs Find Mixed Results, Unintended Consequences," *Religioscope*, January 26, 2011, http://religion.info/english/articles/article_514.shtml.

³⁸ Anya Sarang, Tim Rhodes, Nicholas Sheon, and Kimberly Page, "Policing Drug Users in Russia: Risk, Fear, and Structural Violence," *Substance Use & Misuse* 45, no. 6 (2010): 813-864, doi: [10.3109/10826081003590938](https://doi.org/10.3109/10826081003590938).

³⁹ Presidential Executive Office, "Vladimir Putin Addressed Delegates of the International Drug Enforcement Conference (IDEC)," news release, June 5, 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5533>.

⁴⁰ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Statement by the Delegation of the Russian Federation in Response to the Address by the United Nations Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), H.E. Jan Kubiš*, 998th Plenary Meeting of the Permanent Council, PC.DEL/463/14 (April 30, 2014), <http://www.osce.org/pc/118361?download=true>.

⁴¹ "Глава ФСКН отправил сторонников легализации наркотиков к обкуренному хирургу," *Slon*, September 12, 2014, <http://slon.ru/fast/russia/glava-fskn-otpravil-storonnikov-legalizatsii-narkotikov-k-obkurennomu-khirurgu-1156194.xhtml>.

one official describing it as “a new tool of infiltration into Central Asia [and] a method of strengthening the military-political influence of the United States in the region.”⁴² Instead, it wants to develop the Russian-dominated CSTO as an anti-narcotics alliance that would also consolidate Moscow’s hegemony in Eurasia. This ambition—which is essentially just one manifestation of a wider desire to assert regional authority—will inevitably color its approach to UNGASS 2016 and limit its willingness to countenance international measures that are not under its control. Considering the corruption and complicity within many Central Asian regimes, and the greater emphasis Moscow puts on geopolitics than fighting narcotics, this may well also prove to be a recipe for impressive rhetoric but little real action. After all, Moscow is unlikely to want to jeopardize its political relationships in the region simply because of the heroin trade.

Finally, the Kremlin came into 2014 with a keen awareness of looming budgetary pressures and a disinclination to sign up for measures which would require considerable federal funding. The need to cover the significant cost overruns of the Sochi Winter Olympics, the expense of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine, and the impact of Western sanctions have all combined to make the

Russians look for economies where they can. This will also affect the scale of their aspirations for UNGASS 2016 and their eagerness to bankroll anti-drug programs.

All that said, though, Moscow is neither blind to the social impact of narcotics, nor uncaring. There are many within the public health and law enforcement communities in Russia who are hoping that UNGASS 2016 will force the government to take a serious look at its present policies. In the words of one, in May 2014, “the Kremlin’s default position is to ban and burn, but if the global consensus is to adopt more nuanced policy, then it may prefer not to open up yet another divide between Russia and the world.”⁴³

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⁴² “Антинаркотическую инициативу заблокировали в Вене,” *Kommersant*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1874642>; see also Richard Solash, “Russia Said To Block U.S. Drug Plan Amid Wariness Over Central Asian Influence,” *RFE/RL*, February 17, 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/russia_reportedly_blocks_us_plan_central_asia_opium_drugs_narcotics_afghanistan/24488075.html.

⁴³ Interview by author, Moscow, Russia, May 2014.

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