Drinking in binges was typical for alcohol consumption in the former Soviet Union (Jukkala, 2008). This pattern is changing today, especially in large cities such as Moscow. Young people, who seem to have on average more free time today, drink usually one to three cans of beer during an evening but not a bottle of vodka for three or for two, and then often another one, with beer, as it used to be in the 1970–1980s. Fortified wine (containing 17–19% of alcohol by volume), mostly an imitation of Port (named Portwein), was also consumed at that time, while a 0.75-l bottle per person (or more) was a usual dose. The popularity of Port, Madeira, Vermouth and other fortified wine imitations was due to their low price; but the quality, apart from the cheapest varieties, was usually not too bad. Many of such imitations were obviously natural products manufactured more or less on the basis of original methods. It should be noted, however, that the quality of alcoholic beverages, even of the same denomination, has always been better in Moscow than outside the capital (except for wine-producing areas in the South). Gatherings with female participation often preferred wine—dry, sweet or sparkling—which was inexpensive and sometimes of good quality. Vodka prices remained stable for decades.

THE 1980S ANTI-ALCOHOL CAMPAIGN AND POOR QUALITY SUBSTITUTE

Matters changed in 1985 with the start of the anti-alcohol campaign, when the vodka price doubled and quality of alcoholic beverages deteriorated. After the campaign, together with inflation and transition to the market economy, the prices and quality levels of alcoholic beverages diversified. New sorts appeared and disappeared, the sorts and labels correlated poorly, great part of vodka and other spirits being of low quality. New sorts were sometimes good in the beginning but later worsened. Well-known Soviet-time wine and Cognac sorts disappeared, changed their taste or were replaced by surrogates. However, approximately after the year 2000, the average quality of alcoholic beverages seemed to improve again. The following can be noted in comparison with the Soviet time: in the 1970s and early 1980s, the average monthly salary of ~180–200 roubles was equal to about 40 bottles (half-litre) of vodka; today, for a monthly salary of 20,000 roubles, (around $650, £390) which is regarded as low for Moscow, one can buy 200 bottles of vodka at 100 roubles each.

The relative proportion of counterfeit vodka on sale is difficult to determine and varies by region, being less in Moscow than in smaller towns and rural areas. The quality of counterfeit vodka depends on its origin: it can be a product of regular factories (concealed from excise-duties); its quality may not be different from a standard product. Alternatively, it can be produced from technical or other cheap alcohol, including that imported from abroad. For example, in the late 1990s, alcohol was massively brought to Russia from Georgia; the author of this letter observed a line of tank-lorries of all possible sizes queuing at the border. Private traffic through the Georgian Military Road was impeded at that time by threats and gossip about robbery. This alcohol was used for production not only of vodka but also of other beverages including wine. We do not know from where the alcohol came to Georgia—it was said that it had been imported from other countries. Publications in Russian journals did not mention this source of alcohol, although North Caucasus has been generally known as a nationwide source of cheap alcoholic beverages.

Unpredictability and on average poor quality of alcohol contributed to a decrease of consumption. Finding a disgusting surrogate in a bottle, sometimes bought for a sizeable price and having a nice label, was perceived by some people as an insult and took away appetite.

With respect to constituents, it should be remembered that eons of adaptation of humans to alcohol included adaptation to chemical by-products of natural fermentation. Alternative methods of alcohol manufacturing are accompanied by other by-products, adaptation to which has not developed. Effects of such alcohol can be different from the usual, even eructation smells unfamiliar.

Some say that state monopoly should be restored to guarantee the quality of alcoholic beverages; but the question is what is the real goal of the alcohol policy. According to the First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Viktor Zubkov, 121.4 million dal (dekalitre) of liqueur and vodka products were produced in 2008 and 177.6 millions dal was sold, which means that ~46% was manufactured illegally (Technics and Technology, 2009). Other Russian-language sources give estimates of illegal vodka production in the range 40–50% (Murtazaeva and Skokov, 2003; Urumbaeva, 2008). According to the calculations by Urumbaeva (2009), illegal production has been gradually decreasing since the year 1996. However, it was also stated that illegal vodka production has been on the increase since ~2007–2008 in connection with economical problems (Management Club, 2009). Certainly, real figures are difficult to determine. No less difficult is to estimate the relative volume on sale of poor-quality vodka. This figure was estimated for Moscow (after certain measures taken by the authorities) to be ~5%
(Koshman et al., 2006). Referring to Russian-language professional publications, it should be mentioned that some of them contain ‘anti-advertising’ statements (as it is named in Russia today), without any references or other evidence, e.g. about claimed elevated risk of oesophageal and colonic cancer in consumers of Scotch whisky (Nuzhnyi, 2001).

According to Order nr. 17 of the Federal authority for the control of the alcohol market, dated 30 November 2009, a minimum price of 89 roubles (almost 3 US dollars) for a 0.5-l bottle of vodka was introduced in Russia from 1 January 2010. As far as we can see, this Order has been successfully implemented, and the minimal vodka price in all shops is 89 roubles today. This measure has been discussed by the mass media as an effort to fight counterfeit alcohol sales. On 20 April 2010 followed Order nr. 29 introduced from 1 June 2010 minimal prices for all beverages containing 28% or more alcohol by volume. The prescribed minimal prices are given in a table with a nearly linear dependence of price from alcohol concentration, a step of 1% corresponding to a difference of 2 or (more seldom) 3 roubles. So, a minimum price for a 0.5-l of a beverage containing 28–29% of alcohol is 65 roubles; 39–40% (corresponding to vodka and its minimal price), 89 roubles and 94–95%, 213 roubles. In my opinion, it is probably just an economic measure aimed at an increase of revenues from alcohol sales. Counterfeit vodka is hardly distinguishable by sight from an original product, and there is no reason why counterfeit vodka could not be sold for a higher price. The only visible consequence of the Order nr. 17 has been a price elevation for vodka in general.

It should be noted that commentaries of the mass media such as ‘After the collapse of the Soviet Union, modern Russia quickly found itself engulfed in an epidemic of alcoholism of catastrophic proportions, as an already serious social and health problem transformed into something on an apocalyptic scale’ (RiaNovosti of 01/01/2010: http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100101/157441015.html) are far from reality. In fact, alcohol consumption appears to be decreasing since approximately the year 2000. Decrease in vodka production since 2006 is confirmed in an official publication (Seregin, 2008). The causes of decreasing consumption were discussed previously (Jargin, 2010a,b): the more responsible way of life under the conditions of market economy, as well as frank intimidation against alcoholics, even expropriation of their flats, houses or other property.

The drinking pattern of young people seems to have changed: they can sit in a staircase (Fig. 1) or on a bench in a park, communicate with each other and drink one to three cans of beer each, with others drinking soft drinks which was unusual in the past. Young people say that the atmosphere in public places, also in bars and discos, has become less tolerant for drunks. They rarely drink vodka and wine today. Quality wine is relatively expensive; while cheap wine sorts have largely disappeared. We tasted today’s ‘Portwein’ (Fig. 2), and a consensus was that it is a sort of flavoured tea with addition of poor-quality alcohol. There are also more expensive Port and Madeira imitations, produced in the south of Russia and Ukraine, resembling more or less the Portuguese originals, but sometimes smelling of cheap alcohol (at least those which are sold in Moscow).

People from older generations continue to buy and to drink vodka but in lesser amounts; they too have become

Fig. 1. This company, including the inhabitants of the apartment house and their guests, is sitting in the staircase almost every evening. Some of the young people are students and others work. They consume beer and soft drinks but rarely become considerably intoxicated. In the past, the companies gathering in this staircase often consumed vodka and beer in larger quantities.

Fig. 2. A beverage named ‘Portwein’, sold in Moscow. It contains, according to the etiquette, 18% of alcohol by volume. It tastes like a flavoured tea, with addition of poor-quality alcohol.
more cautious. Apparently, in smaller towns, a higher percentage of drinking people remains, but heavy binge drinking seems to be in decline everywhere, while behaviour of drunken people has changed. During these last years, the author of this letter travelled to many places in Russia and hardly ever saw heavily drunk people making a noise in public, singing songs, etc., which had been usual scenes during the Soviet time. Debates on the themes of current significance, while vodka drinking in long-distance trains or elsewhere, so typical for our past, have become more seldom; and conversation has somewhat lost its previous topicality. Moderate consumption of beer can be seen in many places.

For alcohol, my conclusion is optimistic: Russia has taken a step out of her alcoholic past. However, there is still a need to prevent violations of the rights and interests of those of our fellow-citizens who are suffering from alcoholism.

REFERENCES


