



# WET DRINKING — WET





# CULTURES PROBLEMS

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**THE DRINKING TRADITIONS** and trends are similar in Russia and in Finland. People used to drink large quantities of hard liquor but less frequently, whereas now they drink more frequently but the drinks are not as strong – but not everybody and not everywhere.

Changes in drinking habits are closely connected to changes in society and culture in general. The changes in alcohol consumption happen in the context of economic growth, increased prosperity and wider availability of alcohol. Despite economic growth, alcohol consumption has declined in many countries over the past few decades. It has decreased especially in the wine-producing countries in southern Europe.

In Finland, the use of alcohol has increased considerably over the last four decades. Apart from the economic recession in the early 1990s, alcohol consumption and related harm increased in Finland until the end of first decade of the 2000s. The consumption of alcohol has declined since 2009 and the detrimental effects of alcohol seem to be declining as well. According to a survey by the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finns still drink more alcohol per capita than any of the other Nordic nationalities. In 2013, the total consumption of alcoholic beverages equalled 11.6 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15 years or older.

In Russia, an anti-alcohol campaign in 1985 brought about a sharp decline in alcohol consumption in the years 1985–1989, a decrease in mortality, a reduction in alcohol-related crime and an increase in life expectancy. However, after that the level of alcohol consumption began to rise again.

In 2010 Russia was ranked fourth in terms of alcohol consumption per capita, which was 15.1 litres/year. This very dire situation demanded that the government take not only the medical and social but also the economic and political measures needed to reduce alcohol consumption. At the beginning of the 2010s, Russia actively launched a campaign to reduce alcohol dependency among the population. By the end of 2013, the rate of use had decreased to 13.5 litres. For the first time in the history of the 'new' Russia, the proportion of vodka consumed decreased to less than 50 per

cent. At the same time, regional differences are considerable, ranging from 2 to 3 litres/year in the southern Muslim regions to as high as 16 to 18 litres or more, mainly in the northern European territories

In southern parts of the country, people mostly consume wine, but in northern regions it's spirits, mainly vodka. In northern Russia, the Arkhangelsk region is a prime example of an "alcohol" site. Despite a slight downward trend in recent years, reducing the official number of alcoholics, the population shows a strong preference for spirits in its alcohol consumption, with a tendency to drink large single doses and to drink with great frequency. This gives every indication that the nature of alcohol abuse among the locals is the 'northern' style. The situation is exacerbated by the extremely high frequency of consumption of alcohol surrogates, mainly technical ethyl alcohol.

## Russia



### "Part of being a guy"

Around the world men are more likely to drink alcohol than women. In some countries, like Finland and Russia, women's share of overall consumption has increased. Currently, about 90 per cent of women have consumed alcoholic beverages during the previous year.

The prevalence of heavy episodic drinking is more common among Russian men than in Finland. "It just seems to be part of being a guy in Russia that you are expected to drink heavily." In the southern Muslim areas, the consumption of alcohol by women is in practice excluded. In the other regions, the relation between men and women drinkers varies in different areas between 8 to 1 and 6 to 1. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the differences between men and women have increasingly evened out.

# Finland



*Recorded alcohol consumption per capita (15 years+) in litres of pure alcohol by type of alcoholic beverage, 2010*

In Finland, there are heavy drinkers among both men and women. Over the past three decades the distribution of alcohol consumption has evened out only a little. Ten per cent of males drink about 45 per cent of all the alcohol consumed and ten per cent of women drink 50 per cent of the alcohol consumed by women. This means that one-tenth of the population drinks almost half of all the alcohol consumed. About a fifth of men and about 10 per cent of women drink alcohol at a harmful level.

## A top killer

Heavy drinking and the associated behaviour are more readily accepted in wet drinking cultures like Finland and Russia, while similar behaviour in dry cultures is more likely to be perceived as abnormal. Studies show that a growth in consumption increases the

detrimental effects of drinking. The link is very striking in both countries, and has been manifested particularly in a sharp rise in alcohol-related deaths, with alcohol-related diseases and accidental alcohol poisoning becoming very significant causes of death among working-age men and women.

Alcohol has long been a top killer in Russia and vodka is often the drink of choice, being available cheaply and often homemade in small villages. Previous studies have estimated that more than 40 per cent of working-age men in Russia die because they drink too much, including the use of alcohol that is not meant to be consumed, such as the alcohol in colognes and antiseptics.

In the European North of Russia the problem of excessive alcohol-related mortality is especially significant for the population of the Arkhangelsk oblast. The average loss of life expectancy due to

alcohol-related conditions is 17 years. The vast majority of deaths from alcohol occur at working age.

## Drinking to get drunk

Changes in alcohol consumption are mostly explained by changes in consumer incomes and alcohol policy measures. However, EU membership has relaxed the regulation of alcohol and given more room for the private alcohol industry to affect alcohol policy. Finnish drinking habits have not changed accordingly. At the core of the Finnish drinking culture is still the idea of drinking to get drunk

Despite some positive trends in Russia, too, the main alcohol-related problems in the European North of Russia remain consumption of cheap, uncertified 'shadow' alcohol, a high incidence of somatic diseases being exacerbated due to alcohol abuse in large single doses and detachment on the part of professionals in preventive work with young people.

The strategy to improve the health of the Russian population contains three major provisions which relate to the problem of preventing chemical dependency: reducing the number of deaths from alcohol abuse, reducing the amount of tobacco smoking and curbing the growth of consumption of narcotic drugs. The Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation plans to reduce the alcohol consumption per capita to 10 litres by 2020, although this goal is much higher than the highest possible level recommended by the WHO, which is 8 litres.

Thus, the forecast regarding changes in alcohol consumption in Finland and Russia in the coming years is not very favourable, a prospect which urges further transcultural research on the basic social issues associated with alcohol-related risks. ●

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