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Drugs and Symbolic Pollution: The Work of Cultural Logic in the Russian Press

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ABSTRACT
This article is devoted to analysis of the 'media drug wave' that occurred in Russia at the end of the 1990s. Following a general description of the coverage of the drug problem by the Russian press, the article sets out to explore some reasons that may help to explain the extremely negative attitude of the media and the overwhelming majority of the Russian population to drugs and drug users. Drawing on the cultural theory of risk, it is argued that such an attitude cannot be explained in rational terms of the negative consequences for the health and security of members of society; rather, drugs and drug users are perceived to be symbolic polluters of society. Cultural codes of purity and pollution can help clarify several key themes that inform political and public debates around drugs in Russia. The social context (rise of 'Russian neomoralism') in which the drug problem was constructed is outlined.

KEY WORDS
cultural theory / drug policy / drugs / media discourse / purity and pollution / risk / Russia

Introduction

In the Soviet period of Russian history the problem of drug use did not exist in the arena of public discourse – the number of drug users was very small and, which is no less important, drug use itself was strongly associated with 'social diseases' of the West. According to Soviet propaganda, social conditions under socialist rule were not conducive to various 'immoral' and 'deviant' phenomena such as drug use, homosexuality, or prostitution, whereas in the West capitalism and unbridled individualism almost inevitably engendered moral

decline and degradation of society, expressed in the unrestricted pursuit by its members of various kinds of pleasures unconstrained by moral considerations. Thus, drug use was considered an alien and untypical phenomenon of the Soviet Union and, consequently, was banned from public and media discussion. It only appeared as evidence of the decline of Western morals (often on the pages of the Soviet press in columns named 'Their Morals'). If we assume the social constructionist paradigm of social problems, according to which a social problem exists insofar as there are activities attendant upon its definition (Schneider, 1985; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977), there was no drug problem in the Soviet Union, even though there were very small numbers of drug users. This is not to say that there was no reaction to drug use from various institutions of social control – drug users were imprisoned or subjected to long-term involuntary treatment, but this was done in complete public and media silence as public discussion of these actions would have been tantamount to recognition that drug use existed not only in the 'rotten' West but in the Soviet Union as well.

The situation changed with the advent of Perestroika and the gradual liberalization of the political climate in Russia that occurred at the end of the 1980s. During a very short time it was discovered that sex,[1] drug use, homosexuality and prostitution did exist in the Soviet Union. Concomitantly there appeared various youth subcultures (punks, hippies, etc.) where drug use was an ordinary practice. Discussions of these phenomena started to appear in the late-Soviet media. From this moment we can speak about the construction of a drug problem in the Soviet Union and later in Russia. Press coverage of the drug problem in Russia was on the rise during the whole period of the 1990s and at the turn of the century it reached its climax.[2] Concern about drugs manifested itself not only in the media but also on the level of numerous government agencies of social control; opinion polls also reflected the heightened anxiety of the Russian population about problems of drug use, and strong hostility towards drug users. From 2001 the drug problem started to vanish rapidly from the media. This article aims to outline the construction of the drug problem in the Russian press and also attempts to clarify several key themes that inform public debates around drugs in Russia. It should be stressed that the article does not pretend to give any detailed and comprehensive account of drug problem construction in Russia or Russian print media – this task would require a completely different study. Only basic information on press coverage of the drug problem in Russia is provided. The article's primary focus is on clarifying the operation of cultural codes defining 'pure' and 'polluted' that lie behind the construction processes, which, as Alexander and Smith (1993: 198) contend, can be considered a 'necessary cause' of political and social activity.[3] As I will argue, the internal symbolic logic of society's cultural codes can help clarify the following: why problems related with traditional psychoactive substances (alcohol) do not arouse a public outcry comparable to one which 'polluted' substances (drugs) arouse; the lack of differentiation between 'soft' and 'hard' drugs, and between occasional drug users and addicts in public discourse; an extremely hostile attitude towards drug users and their alleged incurability; and the negative perception of harm reduction programmes.

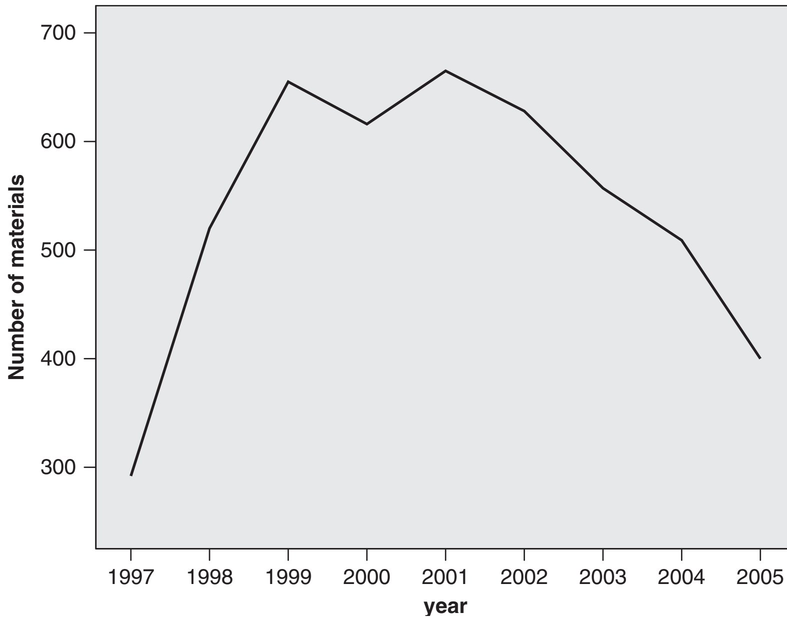

Figure 1 Drug-related articles in the leading Russian newspapers, 1997–2005

The Drug Wave in the Russian Media

While it is hard to estimate the exact state of drug use in Russia as there are no systematic monitoring studies as there are in EU countries by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and in the USA (Monitoring the Future Study), various studies carried out by Russian sociologists (Chepurnikh, 2003; Keselman, 1999; Keselman and Matskevich, 2001) show that drug use is a relatively widespread phenomenon in the Russian populace, especially among the young. Contrary to a rosy and nostalgic picture of the Soviet Union, 'when there was no sex and drugs', advanced by opponents of reforms, the rise of drug use began long before the advent of Perestroika (Bludina, 2002; Rusakova, 2000). However, rapid growth of the number of drug users indeed started from the late 1980s, and towards the end of the 1990s the incidence of drug use (number of new drug users) reached its peak, whereupon it began to subside. In parallel with these developments we can observe a sharp rise in the media interest in coverage of topics related to drug use, which occurred in 1997–2001, followed by a relatively rapid decline beginning from 2001 and continuing up to now (Figure 1). Eleven leading Russian newspapers were included in the analysis.

Comparison of two data sets concerning drug use prevalence – one obtained by researchers in Europe (EMCDDA, 2002) and the other by Russian scholars (Chepurnikh, 2003; Keselman and Matskevich, 2001) – shows that

drug use prevalence in Russia, even at its highest, was roughly at the average European level. In most EU countries and in Russia the number of those who had life-time experience of drug use was around 20% of the population, while the number of adolescents who reported their recent drug use was 13.1% in Russia as compared to 5–15% of young adults in Europe.[4]

This is not the impression one would get when reading the Russian press at the peak of the drug wave. At that time the media constantly published articles where the drug problem was pictured as a 'national catastrophe', which constituted a threat to security and the very existence of the Russian state. Abundant headlines appeared, such as: 'Drug Abuse in Russia: The Threat to the Nation' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 3 March 1998), 'The New Generation Does Not Know That It's Already Doomed' (*Kommersant*, 28 February 1998), 'Heroin Is More Dangerous than Hexogen'[5] (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 6 November 1999), 'At the Edge of the Hellhole' (*Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 3 April 2002), 'The City Is on the Needle' (*Nevskoe vremia*, 13 October 1998). Such headlines and articles were meant to instil in readers the feeling of imminent apocalypse if urgent and harsh measures were not taken. 'The drug plague', it was contended, permeated every nook and cranny of the Russian Federation and all children and adolescents were at permanent risk of becoming drug addicts. For example, an article in *Vecherniy Peterburg* informed its readers that virtually all young people aged from 18 to 23 were addicted to drugs (*Vecherniy Peterburg*, 3 November 2000); another issue of the newspaper reported that in Saint Petersburg the number of drug addicts equalled 400,000, which meant that almost one in ten city residents, including elders and infants, was addicted to drugs (*Vecherniy Peterburg*, 12 February 2003), while another newspaper wrote that more than 13 million drug addicts resided in Russia (*Nevskoe vremia*, 31 January 2003). Such 'rhetoric of calamity' (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993) was a necessary discursive ritual for conveying almost any information on drugs. On 24 March 1999 in *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (the official media outlet of the Russian government) there appeared an article which informed readers that drug addiction worried the Russian citizens more than all other social problems combined.

Any social problems work involves constructing people (Loseke, 2003). Along with a catastrophic definition of the situation the media also constructed people who were attributed personal responsibility for the situation – drug dealers and drug users. Personification of evil simultaneously dramatizes and concretizes the situation (Gusfield, 1989) so that all the complexity of the drug problem and its dependence upon a range of social, cultural, and political factors is reduced to the emotional plane of hatred and indignation. The social world becomes dichotomized into wicked 'them' and virtuous 'us' and, thus, turns into a scene where the Manichean drama of the battle between good and evil is staged.[6]

The image of the 'other' that is constructed in this drama has a range of distinctive features, which distinguishes it from different types of 'other' that one can encounter in other discourses of exclusion, e.g. ethnic discourse. Whereas in the latter 'they' are strangers that crossed the community's physical boundaries, in the former 'they' are transmuted 'we', who transgressed the community's moral

boundaries. There occurs a transformation of the kind that was described in Franz Kafka's story 'Metamorphosis' when a nice young man loved by his family suddenly turns into a disgusting insect. Such transmutation usually comes as a result of seduction by other drug users or drug dealers. Every child is said to be in danger and can be seduced into trying drugs by the omnipresent drug users and pushers ('The Trouble Is at Every Door', *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 2 October 1997). Sometimes, it allegedly happens against the will of the unfortunate – a mutagenic substance (drug) is injected by force. In this case, enforced conversion takes place. But the chances that one of 'them' can become one of 'us' again are slim ('Only one out of a hundred drug addicts is cured. And even this lucky one may any time relapse back to drug use', *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 21 April 2000.) A creature that appears after such a metamorphosis is a crazed zombie who is capable of doing anything to procure drugs. ('To procure drugs, the drug addict will betray, will sell everything, will kill without a second thought. The world of drug dealers and drug addicts is a distorted one and not governed by any moral principles', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 30 October 1998.)

Drugs, risk and pollution

We can now turn to discussion of the causes of utmost revulsion to drugs and strong hostility towards drug users on the part of the media and large segments of Russian society and ask: What was so peculiar about the drug problem that it generated such an overheated reaction in Russian society in general and in the mass media in particular? Why were drug users vilified to such an extent in the Russian press that epithets like 'genetic moral degenerates' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 12 October 2000) were often used in their description? Why were all drug users, no matter what drug they took and how frequently they did it, declared 'criminals' and 'potential criminals'? Maybe, indeed, the problem lies in the danger that drug users pose for society.

It is hard to dispute that the use of some drugs is related to various dangers. Users of such drugs pose a threat not only to themselves but also to their social environment. So, maybe the explanation of such a strong emotional reaction to drugs on the part of the majority of Russian people lies in the danger that is contained in drugs and drug users, and an inclination of the latter to criminal behaviour. However, there are many dangers in the world and some of them go unnoticed and remain ignored, whereas others evoke strong emotional reactions (anxiety, fear, hatred). Thus, consumption of a legal psychoactive substance – alcohol – does not cause such a reaction, despite the fact that the proportion of those who committed a crime while under the influence of drugs during the period from January 2005 till November 2005 was 0.4% of all those who committed a crime, whereas the percentage of perpetrators who committed a crime while drunk was 21.2%.[7] The proportion of drug users who committed violent crimes such as murder was also insignificant (Rusakova, 2000). The number of deaths related to alcohol intoxication is also disproportionately higher than the

number of deaths related to drug use. The same applies to public nuisance. Despite all this public opinion polls show that Russians are much more concerned by drug use than by alcoholism.[8]

While dangers refer to objective conditions that exist in the outside world, the perception and estimation of risk, to employ the term used by scholars who study the social and cultural dimensions of people's perception of hazards (Douglas, 1990, 1992; Garland, 2003; Hacking, 2003), is a product of human values and culture. Mary Douglas writes that 'Arguments about risk are highly charged morally and politically. Naming a risk amounts to an accusation. The selection of which dangers are terrifying and which can be ignored depends on what kind of behavior the risk accusers want to stop' (Douglas, 2002: xix).

The pungency of risk perception is related to a community's moral order. Thus Lupton contends that 'the risks that receive most attention in a particular culture are those that are connected with legitimating moral principles' (Lupton, 1999: 45). Societal attention to risk is a result of strong negative emotions generated by transgression of the community's moral boundaries. Similarly, Hacking (2003) writes that in order to be included in the portfolio of risks of a given community the risk must be interpreted as an 'assault on [the] purity' of the community, as a threat of real or symbolic pollution. Douglas asserts that pollution functions as a mechanism for maintaining society's collective identity and defence of its moral boundaries – every society has rules for maintaining its purity by excluding various 'polluting' substances, phenomena, and types of action.[9]

In the light of the foregoing discussion we can assume why drugs evoke such a strong negative reaction in Russian society. It can hardly be justified on rational grounds: for the overwhelming majority of Russian citizens drugs are polluting substances, by the means of which an attack is made on society's purity. However, this is a highly problematic point. What kind of 'symbolic pollution' are we talking about when harms associated with drug abuse are all too real? How can we establish that here something 'symbolic' is at stake, and not something material? Perhaps the meaning of the word 'symbolic' could help clarify matters. As Gusfield and Michalowicz wrote in their article reviewing how the word 'symbolic' is used in sociology and anthropology, the notion symbolic is called forth when distinction is being made between apparent and latent meanings, when something (as the researcher thinks) stands for something else not immediately present (Gusfield and Michalowicz, 1984: 419). Thus symbolic meaning is by definition an invisible meaning, which the observer can arrive at by inference. Often such inference is made when the researcher sees that some social action achieves something other or more than its declared instrumental and ostensible goals. For instance, for Gusfield (1963) prohibition legislation in America was not only a fight against alcohol consumption, it also symbolized attempts to strengthen the dominance of the white Protestant majority over Catholic and immigrant groups.

Invisible sometimes means well hidden. Modern societies are largely demoralized in a sense that appeals to moral arguments in issues of risk and danger, especially when these relate to consumption practices where freedom of

choice is the name of the game, are becoming less and less legitimate.[10] As Douglas (1992: 26) points out: 'The neutral vocabulary of risk is all we have for making a bridge between the known facts of existence and the construction of a moral community … Indeed, risk provides secular terms for rewriting scripture: not the sins of the fathers, but the risks unleashed by the fathers are visited on the heads of their children, even to the *nth* generation'. Modern discourse on risk is a de-symbolizing discourse; risky behaviour is only risky because it can cause harm, not because it is a symbol of moral decline or symbolic impurity. Rational and instrumental grounds for adoption or rejection of given legislation permitting or banning a given kind of behaviour are the only legitimate arguments in discussion; both its proponents and opponents will fight till the last soldier exchanging statistics and expert opinions on the matter and still will not admit that their stance is conditioned by moral or ideological reasons. Scientific uncertainty helps to perpetuate these instrumental debates for decades (which actually happens with drug debates in the USA where the principal arguments of both liberals and conservatives were formulated as early as in the 1970s, and in Russia, where they were formulated in the early 1990s). Who, if he is in his right mind, will say that he is against drugs because they are 'impure' if he wants to succeed in the public arena? Consequently, the student of morality can rarely pinpoint someone openly moralizing on the issue (except maybe religious conservatives); in other instances she will have to try to see the symbolic behind the rhetorical camouflage of the instrumental. And, since any claims-maker in a public problems arena is armed with scientific arguments, the sociologist can only *assume* that symbolic meanings are the main engine of a claims-maker's activity; it will always remain an assumption that in principle can be disputed.[11] Sometimes it is comparison between similar conditions that receive differential treatment that makes this assumption justified. If, for instance, consumption of one substance with addictive properties evokes the moral indignation of a large part of society while consumption of another substance with addictive properties does not evoke such a reaction, despite the fact that the negative consequences of the latter are greater than those of the former, we can assume that it is not harms associated with consumption but symbolic meanings that largely explain the difference in societal response.

Although the assumption that drugs cause moral indignation because they represent symbolic pollution of society can (and will) always be contested, this assumption helps to clarify several key themes that inform debates around drugs, which can hardly be explained by appealing to rational arguments. Thus it is understandable why problems connected with alcohol abuse and alcoholism do not arouse a public outcry comparable with the one that has been observed in the case of the drug problem, even though the negative consequences and dangers (but not risks!) of the former for Russian society are overwhelmingly greater than the negative consequences related to drug use. Alcohol has been present in Russian society and culture for centuries, and, therefore, is not perceived as a polluting substance; on the contrary, lavish consumption of alcohol (almost compulsory in many social contexts) serves as one of the markers of the Russian

national identity. That is why those who abstain from drinking alcohol in Russia are often met with suspicion or outright hostility in all kinds of social milieux – their refusal to drink is perceived as a breach of cultural codes characterizing the Russian national identity. It also may help explain why the anti-alcohol campaign organized by the Russian authorities when Gorbachev came to power failed to achieve any substantial goals. Despite the colossal propaganda machine possessed by the Soviet authorities, the campaign met acute hostility throughout the Russian populace and was one of the reasons for the extreme unpopularity of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union (Levin, 2006). It shows that elites' power to define what is pure and polluted is limited even when they have a very strong state apparatus at their disposal. The force of collective representations of pure and polluted may thwart all elites' efforts to enforce their definition of these categories.

According to Douglas (2002: 172), pollution ideas come to support the system's lines or, in our terminology, moral boundaries when the latter are precarious. When the community's moral boundaries are challenged and contested, as often happens during revolutions or social crises, emerging uncertainty may lead to the rise of claims to defend and strengthen the moral boundaries. The situation of deep social crisis, the crisis of legitimacy of power, and anomie were what characterized Russia in the 1990s, a period when the drug problem was also debated most vociferously. It was a transitional society with very vague norms regulating the behaviour of its members. It was (and still is, though to a lesser extent) the time of the great clash between traditional moral boundaries regulating various spheres of human activity that remained from the Soviet period and the newly emerged discourses and practices of work, consumption and leisure that included drug use. An extremely negative attitude on the part of medical and law enforcement agencies of social control towards various programmes of harm reduction (syringe exchange, methadone maintenance and other measures) and unfavourable media coverage of such initiatives at the peak of the drug wave can be explained by the internal symbolic logic of binary cultural codes. The measures advanced by advocates of such programmes are directed towards the reduction of various negative *consequences* of drug abuse such as overdoses, virus infections and drug crime, but they do not suggest the main and the most important point for those who come out against society's symbolic pollution – defence of the traditional *moral boundaries*. As harm reduction measures do not imply total abstinence of drug users from drugs (which is an indispensable condition for the 'drug warriors' in Russia), they are interpreted as an attack on the community's moral boundaries;[12] and, indeed, the traditional moral boundaries that regulate legitimate and illicit pleasure turn out to be transgressed and redefined in liberal discourses on drugs. The battle for the defence of a community's moral boundaries is waged by means of amplification of the risks related to their transgression. It is contended that *any* transgression of the traditional moral boundaries is pregnant with innumerable dangers and calamities ('There are no "soft" and "hard" drugs', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 3 October 1999;[13] 'If you try drugs, there will be no way out', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 5 March 1999.) I have described such discursive strategies of construction

of the heightened danger of drug use as employed by the Russian media elsewhere (Meylakhs, 2005). It should be added that media waves, moral panics and other outbursts of moral indignation in the public arena are extremely useful for analysis of symbolic actions as the very emotional intensity of the debates and ample presence of 'open moral rhetoric' make one presume involvement of the symbolic, which at more ordinary moments can be almost completely hidden by 'rational' rhetoric.

Many social scientists note that contemporary risk anxieties, which sometimes burst into moral panics, tend to be concentrated around themes of children and childhood (e.g. Bauman, 2001: chapter 17; Best, 1990; Buckingham, 1997; Critcher, 2003; Jackson and Scott, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Scott et al., 1998). The rhetoric of threat to children was actively exploited in the Russian drug problem construction as well. To explain this phenomenon we must return to the thesis that risks that are experienced in society with particular strength are related to the rules of purity and pollution that regulate society's moral boundaries. In most cultures (including Russian) children are one of the symbols of purity (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993: 40; Jenks, 1996). Drugs are perceived to be polluting substances that 'corrupt the morals of our children', and defile their purity (and, consequently, the purity of the society itself). Drugs and drug users pollute children and make them crazed zombies, who are ready to do anything to procure drugs: there are no moral constraints for them, as all their actions are subordinated to one purpose: the search for drugs. There can be no mercy to 'polluted children' for they introduce 'pure children' to drugs ('It is widely known that one drug addict creates 7–10 addicts during one year', *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 7 September 2001; 'According to statistics every addict creates 10 new addicts each year', *Nevskoe vremia*, 22 February 2002). A symbolically pure creature, the child, disappears and in its place there appears a symbolically and physically 'impure' being – 'the dirty junkie'. This may explain why in the collective conscience of Russian society and in dominant medical, legal, and media discourses on drugs there is virtually no division of drug users into those who are addicted to drugs and those who use them only occasionally – both the former and the latter underwent ritual pollution by drugs and lost their 'drug virginity', whereupon all drug users were automatically stigmatized as 'addicts' and 'junkies'. The same explanation applies to the lack of distinction in the public and media discourses between 'soft' and 'hard' drugs – both are perceived as polluting substances independently of their harm to health. The discourses about 'pure children', who are threatened by drug dealers and drug addicts, and discourses about 'dirty junkies', who are capable of doing anything to get a fix and who seduce 'pure children', circulate as though on different planes – children are perceived exclusively as the object of the drug threat, and 'addicts' as bearers of the threat. The fact that 'addicts' are often children, and yesterday's 'pure children', is largely ignored. On the surface there are numerous declarations that 'drug addiction is a disease of the young', but on the more profound symbolical level it is denied – the addicted children are stripped of purity, that is, from the very status of childhood. Thus, children

who dare to try any drugs undergo the discursive ritual of 'symbolic robbery', in the course of which they are deprived of one of the primary symbols of childhood – purity – whereupon they all automatically turn into a single monolithic category – 'junkies'. That is why the Russian media in the peak of the drug wave were full of warnings such as 'One time is enough [to get addicted]' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 5 March 1999) – indeed, one time is enough, if not to get addicted to drugs, then to lose 'drug virginity' and purity. And that is why in the press it was often reiterated that drug addiction is incurable – it is actually incurable but in a symbolic, not medical sense:

> We must admit: drug addiction is INCURABLE by modern means. All that is sold to us as a result of the treatment is only so called remission, that is, temporary retreat of the disease. The only way of fighting drug addiction and crimes related to it is COMPLETE ISOLATION of drug addicts from society. It is time to admit honestly that the powers that be have been too humane. (*Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 12 February 2002)

Those who attack children are not to be treated ceremoniously. As the head of the Russian Drug Control Agency, Viktor Cherkesov, said recently in an interview on the radio station 'Echo of Moscow': 'You know, when our children are being killed sometimes we cannot think of precise and harmonic forms of neutralization of the enemy.' At the crest of the media drug wave some journalists proposed to place drug dealers on the same footing as serial killers ('The drug dealers kill thousands of people. Why not equate them with serial killers in the Criminal Code? Many people now ask questions like that', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 5 September 1999), and, in the aftermath of September 11 when the global war on terror began, to equate them with terrorists ('Against this backdrop the concern of the president, who declared that "Terrorism and drug addiction are absolutely cognate phenomena, they have common roots and common destructive potential", is wholly understandable', *Chas Pik*, 14 November 2001).

Thus the internal symbolic logic of rules of purity and pollution can help explain several key themes that inform political and public debates around drugs in Russia: differential state policy and public attitude towards alcohol and controlled substances; negative attitudes towards programmes of harm reduction; lack of distinction between occasional drug users and drug addicts; lack of distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' drugs; alleged incurability of chemically addicted persons. In all these instances the prohibitive slant of the state, media and general public cannot be explained by relying on rational criteria of harm and effectiveness; rather, it reflects society's fear of polluted substances, polluted persons, and polluted actions.

When comparing Russian public debates around drugs with those in many Western societies (especially the USA) one cannot but see striking similarities. Despite drastic differences in history, institutional structure, different approaches to economy, democracy or human rights, the fault lines between liberals and conservatives on drug issues and the structure of their argumentation in Russia and in the West are virtually the same. Comparison between drug waves in Russia and the USA (Goode, 1997; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Orcutt and Turner, 1993;

Reinarman and Levine, 1995) shows remarkable similarities.[14] Instead of trying to solve the enigma of world-wide drug prohibition, as some scholars do (e.g. Levine, 2002) by purely instrumentalist political considerations, I would rather propose to look for causes of unity (but also of course of differences) in the cultural codes of our societies, in the cultural rules that define 'pure' and 'polluted' substances, regulate legitimate and illegitimate pleasure, identify 'norm' and 'pathology', and formulate numerous other binary oppositions. An ambitious but necessary comparative project of this kind has yet to be undertaken.

The Social Context of the Drug Problem: The Rise of Russian Neomoralism

The situation around drug use was only one instance of the 'battles for moral boundaries' that were waged at the end of the 1990s in Russia. At the same time there were heated debates in society and in the media around such topics as sexual education, homosexuality, and pornography. Analysis of two major Russian mainstream newspapers shows that it is from 1997 till 2000 that most high-pitched lamentations denouncing Russian moral decline were published, after which they rapidly disappeared from media discussion (Meylakhs, 2006). In the same period numerous non-governmental organizations appeared on the Russian public scene, such as 'parental committees for morality', and similar organizations that were actively engaged in moral crusades against evil of all stripes. Paradoxically as it may seem for some, organizations of the emergent civil society may be engines of intolerance, bigotry, and social exclusion rather than openness, freedom, and social inclusion. Such claims-making activity was set against a backdrop of what may be dubbed 'Russian neomoralism', that is the gradual backsliding on the liberal moral values of the Perestroika period with a concomitant return to the old Soviet values and their blending with a mythologized pre-revolutionary Russian tradition. In all the moral crusades the purpose of neomoralists was to stop symbolic pollution of Russian society from 'alien' polluters of the Russian tradition (as they understood it). It should be noted that in all these 'moral battles' the theme of childhood was exploited to a greater or lesser extent: neomoralist claims-makers contended that pornography corrupts our children, homosexuals seduce them, drugs convert them into zombies and kill, and sexual education perverts their brains.

At first I considered the neomoralist discourse as a kind of retrograde discourse that called for a return to some kind of Soviet or fundamentalist totalitarianism, with a system of total prohibitions concerning homosexuality, discussion of sexuality, and pornography. But more careful inspection of texts revealed significant differences. The purpose of neomoralist discourse, in contrast to totalitarian discourses, is not complete *elimination* of vices and evil from both public and private spheres but *purification of the public sphere*: 'What used to be shameful to show, for what a person could be prosecuted and even imprisoned, now is shamelessly put in the forefront and equally shamelessly demonstrated. Look at us, how non-traditional we are' (*Rossyskaya gazeta*, 22 October 1999). At the same time

it is radically different from totalitarian discourses; the individual's rights to engage in 'immoral behaviour' (such as homosexual activity, or watching pornography, or talking about sex with his or her own children) in the private sphere are acknowledged. Every one can do as he pleases at home. 'Of course, it is a completely personal matter, and thank God, nobody has a right to intervene in this kind of thing now,' it was argued in this same article (*Rossyskaya gazeta*, 22 October 1999). The problem of drugs was different, however, in that it also included purification, not only in the public but also the private sphere; nowhere was it mentioned that drug users have the right to use drugs in the home.

As mentioned, from early 2000 the neomoralist discourse almost disappears from the newspapers that were examined. In other words, neomoralist discourse (at least in the mainstream press) turned out to be short-lived.[15] Roughly from this moment the media drug wave also waned. We can also note that all this discourse about the moral decline of the Russian society had always been present in the communist and right-wing press, but for a short time it appeared, and with a vengeance, in the mainstream press, swiftly vanishing thereafter. It should be stressed, however, that despite the climax of this discourse being probably in the past, many of its typical features are still present, though in diluted form.

It is for separate research to determine why these 'battles for morality' around drug use, homosexuality, pornography, and sexual education were waged with such intensity in 1997–2000, and why they lost strength thereafter. Here elaborate analysis of interaction between structure and agency is needed. However, if, as Lamont writes, 'boundary work is used to reinstate order within communities by reinforcing collective norms' (Lamont, 1992: 11), then the structural conditions of intensive boundary work – within deep political, economic and institutional crisis – were clearly present. Most Russian sociologists agree that the years 1998–99 represent the lowest point of Russian society's transitional period (e.g. Danilov, 1999; Levada, 1999; Steinberg, 2003).[16] Steinberg (2003: 403) notes that the *Zeitgeist* in Russian society at this point could be succinctly expressed in the remark that 'this is definitely not the point we wanted to arrive at, at the outset of reform'. It looks like Russian society was experiencing a moral shock when such 'unintended consequences of freedom' as drug use and other polluting phenomena nobody anticipated at the outset of reforms were so clearly visible in the public arena.

The late Yuri Levada, one of the most prominent Russian scholars who studied public opinion in Russian society during the whole 'transitional period', while incisively criticizing the Russian authorities for backsliding on democracy, wrote about the changes in the public mood that occurred beginning from Autumn 1999 – a steep growth of social optimism, hope for the future, evaluation of personal well-being, trust in social institutions etc. (Levada, 1999). He and other commentators also noted the stabilization of economic, social, and political orders in Russia (Levada, 2003; Steinberg, 2003; Voronkov, 2003; Yadov, 2003; Zaslavskaya, 2003). Despite clearly authoritarian overtones of political stabilization, no repressive 'legislation of morality' was introduced. On the contrary, repressive drug laws were partly liberalized in 2004, and, overall, discussion of 'moral decline of Russian society' turned out to be at the margin

of public and media discourses. It seems that a Durkheimian thesis that public preoccupation with the moral is a reflection of its concern with the social holds true in the Russian case.

Although the emotional intensity of discussion of the drug problem has subsided and the drug laws have softened, perception of drugs as polluting substances continues to inform the state drug policy and public discussion of drugs. Not long ago legislation for involuntary treatment of drug addicts was proposed in the parliament; the future of this legislation is still undetermined. Russia remains one of the few states where methadone programmes are banned, even though such programmes have proved to be effective elsewhere. Syringe exchange programmes are de facto banned in some regions, and their implementation is seriously limited in others. Nevertheless, the faded intensity of collective sentiments towards drugs and the diminishing 'sacredness' of the issue raise hopes that less emotional and more rational approaches to the drug problem and drug policy will hold sway.

Conclusion

In this article I did not seek to provide an elaborate account of the social processes that led to, maintained, and ended the media drug wave which occurred in Russia at the end of the 1990s. While trying to present the basic contours of the drug wave progression and decline, and provide a very sketchy analysis of the rise and fall of the social problem of drugs in the Russian media, I clearly wished to shift the research focus from the questions of timing of the wave and interests of those who take part in its construction to the issue of the cultural substance of drugs. Collective representations of 'pure' and 'polluted' (substances, people, types of action) is a major explanatory tool. When the state or some group of claims-makers try to impose a definition of the situation that clearly contradicts the cultural codes, even huge material and institutional resources cannot help them to change society's collective representations. That may explain why the Russian authorities' attempts to toughen alcohol and drug policies resulted in such different outcomes. In short, cultural codes can easily be exploited by elites or interest groups but cannot be created ex nihilo or transformed at will.

Drawing on the cultural theory of risk, I have attempted to demonstrate how the internal symbolic logic of pure and polluted works in the Russian media discourse on drugs. With the aid of this theory I have tried to focus not only on how drug users are constructed and stigmatized by the media (there is already a huge amount of research on this) but to clarify a range of distinctions and policy measures related to drugs and drug users. It is my contention that the binary logic of pure and polluted can account for a lack of distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' drugs, unwillingness of the media to discriminate between occasional drug users and drug addicts, claims that drug addiction is 'incurable', or the negative portrayal of harm reduction programmes at the peak of the drug wave. This logic can also account for completely different public attitudes and state

approaches towards drugs and alcohol. Remarkable similarities in drug policy and even more striking similarities in argumentation that are to be found featuring in debates on drug policy between liberals and conservatives in Russia and in the West also attest to this thesis. The latter point, in my view, calls for comparative research into the structure of Russian and Western cultures; such a study could help establish the 'cultural bed' that accounts for such unity.

Debates around drug use are only one instance of battles for moral boundaries that were waged in Russia in the time of acute crisis during the late 1990s. At this time there was intense media and public discussion of other 'symbolic polluters' of Russian society – sexual education, homosexuality, and pornography. The processes of institutional stabilization that began in Russia thereafter diminished public perception of Russia as a society in a state of acute moral crisis; consequently, debates on the 'moral decline of Russian society' turned out to be on the periphery of public and media discourses.

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Notes

1 In the beginning of Perestroika a woman participating in a TV discussion between Soviet and American audiences claimed that 'there is no sex in the Soviet Union'.

2 While it can be argued that the drug situation in Russia circa 2000 was a 'moral panic' – and I myself did it elsewhere (Meylakhs, 2006) – in this article I use the more modest term 'drug wave', which is analogous to the term 'crime wave' used by Fishman (1978) in his seminal work 'Crime Waves as Ideology'. Both terms refer to the fluctuating character of media constructions of deviance. By choosing this modest term I clearly wish to disengage from the notorious issue of disproportional (in the sense of unwarranted) media or societal reaction to deviance, which has been haunting the moral panics literature for decades (Critcher, 2003; Murji, 1998; Thompson, 1998; Waddington, 1986). This article is not about the disproportionality of the media reaction to the drug problem (and, therefore, not about a moral panic), it is about the cultural logic in media representations of drugs.

3 It might be the best that a purely 'discursive' and 'cultural' study can hope for.

4 The reported figures serve only to illustrate that the Russian drug situation was of the same *scope* as the European one, and not to demonstrate that these situations were identical. Even if it could be argued that the Russian situation was worse it would not change the article's argumentation.

5 Hexogen is an explosive that was used in terrorist attacks in Moscow in 1999.

6 While there was overwhelming consensus among various media outlets as to the graveness of the drug situation, there were more diverse attitudes towards drug users. Some took an accusatory stance whereas among others a more ambivalent position towards drug users as 'villains-victims' was present. The position of a given newspaper could also fluctuate with time; it was usually harshest during the drug wave crest and more mild and ambivalent after it. The revanchist (communist and ultra-nationalist) newspapers were tough on drug users and other 'deviants' while the mainstream press (both moderate liberal and moderate conservative) was more ambivalent. However, my analysis elucidated three things: first, there was no active media opposition (neither liberal, nor conservative) to the repressive drug laws that were passed in 1997; second, various myths and urban legends related to drug use and drug users were abundant in all the press; third, although the degree of vilification and stigmatization of drug users varied, there was no newspaper where this was absent. The analytical focus of this article is on the mainstream press as characteristic of Russian society at large.

7 The data of the Ministry of Interior Affairs appear on its internet site: http://www.mvd.ru/files/3833.pdf

8 In June 2005, 21% of respondents mentioned drug use as one of the most poignant problems in Russia, as compared to 12% who mentioned alcoholism (VCIOM, 2005).

9 A number of brilliant sociological analyses address questions of outlining symbolic boundaries of various societies and social groups and the questions of boundary-work (e.g. Beisel, 1992; Epstein, 1992; Lamont, 1992, 1995, 2000; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Wuthnow, 1987). (For a review article on history and the current state in sociology of the concept of symbolic boundaries see Lamont, 2001; Lamont and Molnar, 2002.) While Michèle Lamont prefers to use the term 'symbolic boundaries', making 'moral boundaries' a subtype of 'symbolic boundaries', I employ the old Durkheimian term 'moral boundaries' for the article's purposes as the boundary work I analyse is the battle for society's morality. While both terms refer to society's members' conceptual schemes to classify social reality, for many purposes Lamont conceives them as synonymous when she writes that for Durkheim society is defined by its symbolic boundaries, that is, by common definition of the sacred and the profane, similar behaviour codes, and common compliance with society's rituals (Lamont, 2001).

10 Anthony Giddens calls it 'evaporation of morality' (Giddens, 1991: 145). Such de-legitimation of morality as an arbiter in questions of banning and permitting is related, in my view, to the current state of morality itself in modern societies. As MacIntyre (1985: chapters 1–3) argues, in modern societies emotivist concepts of morality prevail when moral judgements are construed as subjective judgements of taste: 'this is good' in such a conceptualization essentially means 'I like it, do so as well'.

11 Douglas rather easily jumps to the symbolic from the instrumental without problematizing possible difficulties of and challenges to this transition when, for example, she writes that often our hygienic explanations of dirt avoidance are 'sheer fantasy' (Douglas, 2002: 85). Similarly, when Hacking writes that 'the war on drugs is not presented primarily as about real harm' (Hacking, 2003: 39), he fails to see that a large part of the debates *is* presented in purely instrumental terms of harm.

12 For instance, methadone programmes, if implemented, officially sanction legal non-medical use of a 'polluted substance', which is close to heroin in its pharmacological properties. Needle exchange programmes, according to the prohibitionists, send the 'wrong message' – that to use illicit drugs is acceptable and the state by permitting dispensing of clean syringes condones the use of 'polluted substances'.
13 Definitions of drugs and the distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' drugs in Russia and in the West are virtually the same. 'Soft' drugs mean marijuana and, sometimes, 'club' drugs (such as ecstasy), 'hard' drugs include all other drugs (especially heroin). The very expression 'soft drugs' ('legkiye narkotiki') was apparently translated to Russian from English.
14 This most certainly does not mean that there are no differences in drug policies in these countries. There are, and very substantial ones. As the cultural cannot be reduced to the social, so the social cannot be reduced to the cultural. I merely want to emphasize that cultural tool-kits (Swidler, 1986) that social actors draw upon when guiding and justifying their actions are similar when it comes to the drug problem, and these tool-kits necessarily inform social action (being a necessary cause, as was earlier mentioned) though they do not determine it rigidly.
15 Similar processes occurred also in the religious media. Zolotova (2004) notes that at present the mainstream Orthodox media prefer to write about the positive values of family life, rather than fight spiritual corruption and immorality as they did at the end of the 1990s.
16 Just a few key events of that time illustrate the point: the August default of 1998 when the rouble fell three times against the dollar over a six-month period and the country's bank system became paralyzed; the consecutive resignation of four prime ministers and an attempt to impeach Yeltsin; massive strikes throughout the country.

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