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Sochi Olympic Smoking Ban a Test Case for Russia Woes

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Standing outside a Cinnabon store in the mountains in Sochi, Ksenia Zotova dragged on a menthol cigarette and said she didn't realize Russia planned to make the Winter Olympics its biggest-ever smoke-free event.

"That surprises me," Zotova, a 25-year-old from Moscow, said in an interview. "There's lots of smoking in Russia, because there are very cheap cigarettes."

While the sale and consumption of cigarettes is forbidden in the city's Olympic venues, including bars and restaurants, the bans aren't tightly enforced. Visitors are routinely seen smoking inside the medals plazas and by arena entrances, leaving cigarette butts as evidence.

Russia's efforts to stub out smoking at its \$44 billion coming-out party illustrate the government's uphill battle against a slate of health woes that contribute to Europe's second-lowest life expectancy behind Kazakhstan. They include a fastest-growing HIV epidemic, rampant alcoholism, a fatty diet and a broad-based cultural acceptance of tobacco use.

"Big kid, big problems," said Luigi Migliorini, the World Health Organization's representative to Russia. "Alcohol, smoking, nutrition -- if you put all that together you find a very good ground for cardiovascular diseases. This is the number one cause of mortality in Russia."

In Sochi, the smoking restrictions are limited. Intended to protect more than 155,000 athletes, delegates and volunteers from exposure to second-hand smoke, they cover the athletic arenas while designating specific smoking areas elsewhere. Russia stopped short of a total ban on concerns that it would hurt attendance, the Sochi organizing committee said in an e-mail.

Accreditation Loss

While strict sanctions generally aren't applied to visitors, employees and volunteers caught smoking may lose their accreditation, the group said.

Still, the effort is gaining praise from health-care advocates. Alexey Kotov, the program manager for Russia with International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, cites it as playing "an important role in promoting national tobacco-control legislation."

Sochi was also one of the first to develop a regional tobacco-control strategy, Kotov said, joining the WHO in helping to build an alliance of smoke-free cities in Russia in October 2012. Seventeen cities signed up to the initiative, according to the Geneva-based WHO.

'Incredible Goodwill'

The agency found "incredible goodwill at the city administration level" as it worked to prepare Sochi for the concept of a smoke-free Olympic park, the WHO's Migliorini said. "Of course, only after a post-games assessment will it be possible to understand how efficiently the goodwill was implemented."

For Russia it is a test case with important implications.

Associated cardiovascular and respiratory diseases have cost Russia's health-care system 125 billion rubles (\$3.6 billion), according to a 2013 study in the journal BMC Public Health. Health officials say those costs arise because 60 percent of Russian men smoke while the rate among women has doubled to 22 percent over 15 years.

Tobacco kills about 300,000 of the country's 144 million people annually, the WHO said, while males born in Russia in 2011 can expect to live six fewer years than the 69-year average among Europeans.

Russia is the world's second-largest market for tobacco companies after China, and has some of the world's lowest cigarette prices. A pack of 20 Marlboro cigarettes costs \$1.74 in Russia, compared with \$6.36 in the U.S. and \$15.11 in Norway, according to The Tobacco Atlas, a joint program of the World Lung Foundation and the American Cancer Society.

'Behind the Field'

"It's amazing how badly Russia has done when the rest of the developed world is going the other way in terms of smoking prevalence," said Rob Moodie, a professor of public health at the University of Melbourne. "They're way behind the rest of the field. Everything to date has been so badly undermined by the tobacco industry."

Multinational companies, including Japan Tobacco Inc. (2914), Philip Morris International Inc., British American Tobacco Plc (BATS) and Imperial Tobacco Group Plc control more than 90 percent of the Russian tobacco market, according to last year's report in BMC Public Health. In November, President Vladimir Putin's government introduced a national ban on tobacco advertising and set fines for individuals and businesses that violate the country's requirement for smoke-free indoor public places.

Under the new law, the only evidence consumers will see of tobacco products in stores will be price lists. Cigarettes and other tobacco products can't be publicly displayed.

Workplace Ban

In June, the government will implement a ban on smoking in workplaces, hotels and restaurants. If the changes are implemented and enforced successfully, the country could avert the premature deaths of 2.7 million men and 1 million women from 2015 to 2055, researchers from Georgetown University in Washington wrote in a report in the journal Tobacco Control last year.

Earlier this week, a small group of people were smoking at one of the designated smoking benches near Sochi's Olympic cauldron while a small child sat nearby. When he fell off the bench, they laughed and picked the child up, consoling him with cigarettes dangling from their lips.

While similar scenes can be seen at many of the designated sites in Sochi's Olympic park, the restrictions help those who don't want to smoke avoid the consequences, said Svetlana Papina, 55, a pensioner from nearby Anapa.

“At least more people are smoking in the designated spots and not puffing it into your face when walking by,” Papina said in an interview.

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