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## **Battlefield View of the War on Drugs**

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

Andrei leaned back on the couch, hands on his balding pate, and sighed.

"This happens every time," he said.

A veteran city police investigator, Andrei had planned to bust a heroin dealer later that day, but the small-time dealer his informants had been tracking had split town. It was a Sunday afternoon, and he was in the office as usual.

Andrei, 39, is a foot soldier in Russia's war on drugs, an undertaking that has received the vocal backing of President Vladimir Putin but which critics claim has accomplished little more than throwing minor drug offenders into the notoriously overcrowded prison system, more notable for rampant tuberculosis and AIDS than its corrective capabilities.

On the condition that his real name and specific department not be identified, Andrei agreed to give a behind-the-scenes glimpse at Russia's drug war, currently being fought by four agencies: the Federal Anti-Drug Service, the Federal Customs Service, the Interior Ministry and the Federal Security Service, or the FSB.

As a city police investigator, Andrei's work is ultimately overseen by the Interior Ministry. He typically arrives early to work, though his workday officially starts with a 9 a.m. meeting, where he and his five colleagues and two superiors discuss what everyone has on their plates for the day, which could be anything from meeting with informants to heading out for reconnaissance work or a bust.

After the half-hour meeting, Andrei returns to the office he shares with his five colleagues. Typically, he pores over the 1,200-page dossier on drug users, dealers and convicts that he has compiled in eight years of fighting drugs in his district. He also uses the time to work on intricate flow charts tracking the drug rings he's trying to crack. There's not much else to do in the morning.

"If someone's a narkoman, he's usually asleep right now," Andrei said, using the blanket pejorative for drug addicts and casual users. "Things don't usually get busy until the evening."

Andrei doesn't suffer drug addicts easily, suggesting at one point that he wouldn't mind if they had their status as citizens revoked. He then backpedaled a bit.

"There are different levels of drug addicts," he said. "You have the lowest of the low with the criminal

element, but there are some well-educated kids -- kids with good educations who read books -- who just get hooked on drugs and can't get off."

The concession seems appropriate, given the importance of the drug addicts for Andrei's work. The primary weapon in his battle is a network of petty drug offenders who have agreed to cooperate and inform -- some in exchange for having criminal charges against them softened or dropped altogether, some in exchange for free drugs.

But the contempt lingers nonetheless, even for those who help him.

"See that cup?" he said, pointing to a black coffee cup resting on a safe in his office, right next to the television. "Whatever you do, don't drink out of it. That's for drug addicts, and you know they have AIDS and hepatitis and things like that."

On that Sunday afternoon, Andrei called one of his main informants -- Zhenya -- into the office and told him that the planned bust of the heroin dealer had been called off and that they'd have to discuss a plan for catching a different dealer, an Uzbek.

Zhenya, also not his real name, is the 29-year-old son of a diplomat and has been hooked on heroin on and off for about eight years. He has already served two prison terms for possession, with sentences of six months and two years.

Zhenya has been informing for Andrei for about four years now, working in exchange for money some times, but usually for free drugs.

"Leave the room for a second," Andrei told Zhenya. Once the informant had made his exit, he took out a small package containing 1 gram of heroin from his black briefcase and set it on the desk. "OK. You can come back in now."

Zhenya returned, took the heroin from the desk and pocketed it, leaving the room again with Andrei's specific instructions not to snort it in the department's bathroom. An accidental overdose in the building would not sit well with Andrei's superiors.

"We would pay them money if we could, but I don't have any money. All I can offer him is drugs," said Andrei, who has access to drugs confiscated during arrests.

Zhenya was obviously high when he returned to Andrei's office 10 minutes later. He made himself a cup of tea in the designated drug-addict cup and began nodding off occasionally while answering questions about his work as an informant. He said he had had a few close calls with drugs dealers almost finding out he was a narc.

"But usually they're scared of you," he said. "If they know you're working with the police, they won't fuck with you. They value their lives more than yours. The most they'll do is threaten you. It's not like Chicago here."

Andrei left Zhenya alone in the office to go have a smoke in the bathroom -- the building's de facto smoking room since his boss banned smoking in the office. When he returned, Zhenya told him he

had already called -- without consulting Andrei -- and arranged to meet the Uzbek dealer that evening at a time when Andrei wouldn't be able to get enough men together to make a bust.

It was the second canceled bust on what was technically Andrei's day off.

## **Meager Resources**

If Andrei's work schedule is heavy -- he said he spends around 18 hours a day, every day, working -- he said it might be tolerable with adequate compensation and resources.

But the impromptu tour he gave of his office made it clear that resources are scarce.

"If we moved out and left everything the government has given us, the only thing left would be the desks, the chairs and the safes," he said.

The computer, the fax machine, the spare monitor and the digital camera he uses to photograph suspects for the entire department are work tools he has bought himself since becoming a drugs investigator eight years ago. He was a regular beat cop before that, having joined the force in 1985.

"I could sell it all, but what would I work with?" he said.

The government earmarked close to 7 billion rubles, or roughly \$250 million, for Russia's drug war in 2004, according to the Finance Ministry web site.

It is a paltry sum compared to the \$12 billion the United States spends annually on its war on drugs, and Andrei said that even the money that is allocated rarely trickles down to his department's operations.

"Officials tell us we're not doing a good enough job fighting drugs, that we should show the kind of results the Americans have," he said. "But look at the money and equipment the Americans have. How can we compete with that?"

Andrei said buying his own equipment is especially hard on his finances given his official salary, which totals a little more than 8,000 rubles, or about \$290, per month. That is his salary as a veteran officer, while younger policemen receive considerably less. The result, he said is obvious.

"Every policeman is corrupt," he said, not excluding himself. It's just a question of degree.

"No one can live on such wages alone," he said. "It's just that some drive Ladas, while others drive Mercedes. You figure it out."

Andrei doesn't own a car, an indication, perhaps, of where he draws the line.

Some officers are selling drugs on the side, he said, while others take bribes in exchange for not filing criminal charges against a suspect. Andrei said he despises the former, while he has his own moral code when it comes to the latter.

"I never let a real bad guy off the hook," he said. "I never send an armed criminal back on the streets just in exchange for money."

He said he applied the same code to a job offer two years ago to work face control for a local nightclub, ostensibly to keep drug users and dealers out, but in reality to pluck the narcs out of line and send them packing while allowing only club-approved dealers to conduct business in the venue.

"They knew I knew all of the narcs and dealers in the district, and they were going to pay me \$2,000 for two weeks of work per month," he said. "That's how well they judged my professionalism. But I couldn't do it. You can't just sell out your country for money."

Ever a believer in the drug war, Andrei nonetheless mustered up some cynicism.

"On the one hand, you have to look out for your homeland," he said. "But on the other hand, who's going to look out for you? It's a vicious circle."

## **What Is to Be Done?**

Whether Russia's drug war in its current incarnation is actually protecting the country is eminently debatable.

Government officials claim Russia has around 4 million citizens who regularly take drugs. Viktor Cherkessov, head of the Federal Anti-Drug Service, told Politichesky Zhurnal in December that the situation is critical and Russia has "increasingly become a country with all of the signs of a developed drug subculture."

Government agencies and proponents of drug policy reform have been at odds over how to address the spread of drugs, the former advocating stricter legislation and punishment for drug offenders and the latter proposing softer punishment and medical treatment -- rather than incarceration -- for drug addicts.

A new law that came into effect in May allowing drug users to possess a greatly increased amount of an illegal substance without risk of being thrown in jail was praised by drug reform proponents and roundly criticized by Cherkessov and his agency, who see it as an added obstacle in the war on drugs.

Last year, 150,096 drug-related crimes were registered in Russia, a 17 percent drop from 2003, according to the Interior Ministry's web site. Lev Levinson, head of New Drug Policy, an advocacy group for drug law reform established in 2003, said the drop was directly attributable to the new law, which hands out fines, rather than jail sentences, to minor offenders but has stipulated harsher punishments for dealers.

According to his group's estimates, 30 percent to 40 percent of the drug-related crimes registered in 2003 would now be considered only administrative violations, punishable by fine.

Given that the law only came into effect in May of last year, Levinson said the 17 percent drop in 2004 showed that a liberalized drug policy was effecting positive change in the war on drugs.

"The legislation is now in place to concentrate on dealers and drug barons and stop jailing people who are not criminals," Levinson said.

Andrei is not a fan of the new law.

"Now any drug addict can stand right outside a police station and openly smoke marijuana," he said. "All we can do is fine him."

However, he conceded, indirectly, that the law has helped curb police corruption.

"It was easier for cops to plant drugs on people, because they didn't have to plant very much," he said. Under the new law, possession of a gram or less of heroin is not a criminal offense.

"It's more difficult to plant a kilogram of heroin on someone," he said.

But opponents of liberalization have friends in high places.

Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev told the State Duma in December that the average age of drug users has gradually fallen since the early 1990s, which he blamed on society's gradual acceptance of drugs.

"Ten years ago almost the entire country viewed [drug addiction] extremely negatively, and in recent years we see television and other media outlets increasingly discussing possible full or partial legalization of drugs," Nurgaliyev said, Interfax reported.

The Federal Anti-Drug Service, with an army of 40,000 officers charged by Putin to crack down on drugs, officially came into existence on July 1, 2003. It has courted controversy ever since its creation, however, most notably for aggressively seeking out veterinarians who use ketamine, an anesthetic commonly used in pet operations that was included on a list of illegal substances.

Drug policy reform activists say Cherkessov's service is redundant, since the Interior Ministry and Federal Customs Service already have the experience and structures in place to fight drug trafficking.

Andrei says that he'll press on fighting what he sees as the good fight, though he hesitated when asked if the war on drugs could actually be won.

"It's difficult to say," he said. "But at the very least, I think we can put up a good resistance."