

13 THE DISCOURSE OF THE PRESS AND THE PRESS OF DISCOURSE: CONSTRUCTING THE DRUG PROBLEM IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA

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Introduction

This article explores how the drug problem was constructed in the Russian press at the turn of the century. It contributes to shifting Russian sociology away from an exclusive attention to drug users and their 'problems' to those who construct and define the drug situation in order to problematize 'self-evident' and 'taken-for-granted' categories in dominant medical and criminological discourses.

In contemporary Russian sociology work on drug use adopts an objectivist paradigm; any negative (in the researcher's eyes) condition is automatically identified as a social problem. Thus, in case of drug use, the sociologist's task is reduced to description of the condition (as a rule in quantitative terms) by means of answering questions such as who uses what and how often, the public's attitude to it, and what can be done to stop it. Not long ago at a conference on the prevention of drug addiction, all medical professionals as one talked about necessity of cooperation between all specialists dealing with the problem, with sociologists assigned the role of statisticians who, as one doctor put it, 'measure the social constants' i.e. demographers that collect routine information but who do not have any authority for real sociological analysis of the situation. Unfortunately, exactly this scenario unfolds in Russian society where all too often sociologists are engaged in serving and confirming dominant medical and criminal theories, providing their statistical legitimation. In labelling theory's language, Russian sociologists are mainly occupied with studying those 'who are labelled' and much less often those 'who label'.

Though very scarce, works of constructionist orientation do exist in the Russian sociology of deviant behavior. Particularly noteworthy are articles written by Smirnova (2000), Bludina (2000), and Kosterina (2002), all devoted to analyzing the construction of moral panics around drugs in the Russian regional press. However, despite their considerable merits, these works have a number of shortcomings. First, in spite of their declared constructionist orientation, they have a strong objectivist bias. For instance, Kosterina writes that 'modern mass media have unlimited possibilities both in covering and constructing social problems' (2002:200). One can conclude from this quote that 'covering' and 'constructing' are totally different things, that it is possible to cover a problem without taking part in its construction. It implicitly follows from this that covering is conferring on audience some objective, unitary, and peremptory 'truth', while constructing is something artificial, creating something *ex nihilo*. Such a point of view misinterprets the concept of social construction of reality, reducing it to the creation and dissemination of various myths and lies for economic or political gain. Any linguistic activity is a social (re)construction of reality, just as the social construction of reality is accompanied by the creation of linguistic categories. All social problems are socially constructed regardless of whether the sociologist-researcher considers them legitimate or not. Second, these works brilliantly analyze the Russian drug situation and its presentation by Russian media but pay insufficient attention to the *discursive* mechanisms in the construction of a drug moral panic. This article undertakes the tasks of filling gaps in the works of contemporary Russian sociologists of constructionist orientation, using a case study of the representation of drug use in the national and local Russian press.

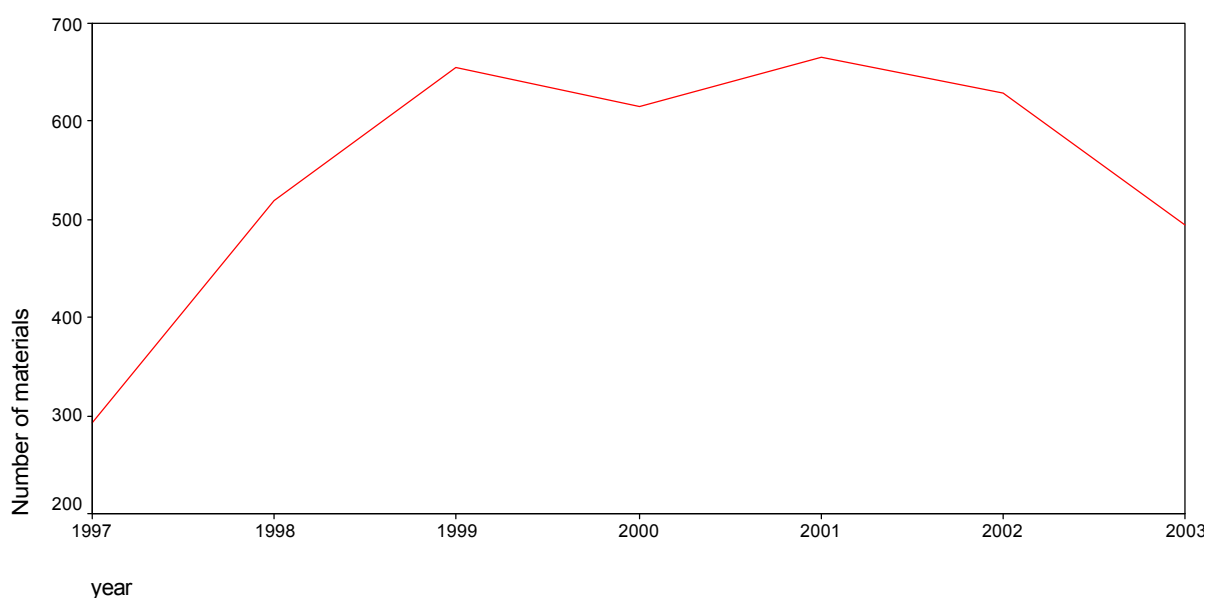
Drug use in the media public sphere

Within the framework of this study an analysis was conducted of articles in leading regional Saint Petersburg newspapers on the subject of drugs and drug addiction for the period 1997 to 2003. The analyzed newspapers included: *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, *Nevskoe vremia*, *Chas Pik* and *Vecherniy Peterburg*. I have chosen for analysis those articles (news briefs, news items, columns, editorials, and features) that individually or in combination used the words

'drugs' and 'drug addiction'. These were identified by the search engine Integrum. Additionally, to compare portrayals of the drug situation in Saint Petersburg with those in Russia overall, parallel articles were analyzed in national newspapers. The latter included: *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, *Izvestiya*, *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Kommersant*, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*. Data analysis was both quantitative and qualitative.

The moral panic about drugs did not last long, according to the trends in the total numbers of drug related stories in all the national and two local newspapers (*Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti* and *Nevskoe vremia*). In all these papers the trend is very similar – a sharp growth in the number of articles in 1998 and 1999, and a gradual decline in 2002 and 2003. For instance, in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* the number of articles mentioning drug addiction 45 in 1997 was 45, 93 in 1998, 113 in 1999 128 in 2000 130 in 2001 and 84 in 2002. By 2003 the decline was even more apparent with just 51 articles. Figure 13.1 presents these results diagrammatically.

Figure 13.1 Drug-related articles in leading Russian newspapers 1997-2003



As is evident from Figure 13.1 and Figure 13.2, the interest of the press in drug use waxes and wanes. This contradicts the view of the press as a mirror of public problems, reacting to the extent of the real danger. The drug situation did not change, or only changed slightly, while the rise and fall of press interest was dramatic. Also one can see a certain pattern, such as peaks in 1999 and 2001 for practically all outlets. This pattern identifies tendencies characteristic of the press as a whole which do not vary with editorial decisions in each newspaper. *Rossiyskaya gazeta* is as mainstream as you can get because it is the official newspaper of the Russian government, where official pronouncements were regularly made about the enforcement or revision of drug laws. Its interest in the drug problem peaked in 1999 and had faded by 2001. On March 24, 1999 an article appeared in the newspaper, which informed the readers that drug addiction worried the Russian citizens more than all other social problems combined. In Saint Petersburg drug addiction was declared the most pressing problem two years later – in 2001 (*Nevskoe vremia*, 26.04. 2001).

Taking a broad brush, we can outline a picture of the overall Russian drug situation as consisting of three main phases. Phase 1 we call 'Before the tempest'. The media constantly

publish apocalyptic forecasts. Phase 2 we call 'The Hurricane'. There is a deluge of articles on drugs. Their main subject: apocalypse has already come. There are demands to increase penalties for drug use and drug sale, including the death penalty. Similar measures are advocated by some regional governors. Harshening of drug legislation takes place consequently in 1997 and 1998. Phase 3 we call 'After the storm'. Interest in the problem gradually subsides. Repressive rhetoric used to advocate punishment by legal institutions gives way to rehabilitative rhetoric used to advocate treatment by medical institutions (though both are essentially social control mechanisms). This change finds expression in legal change with an amendment to the Criminal Code in the autumn of 2003 that partly liberalizes the extant drug laws. In parallel fashion the rhetoric shifts away from the right of the community to be protected from drug-related crime to the rights of the individual to be protected from state power.

In Saint Petersburg, however, the moral panic was short lived. Analysis of coverage in the region's newspapers (*Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, *Nevskoe vremia*, *Chas Pik*, and *Vecherniy Peterburg*) suggests that a classic moral panic only lasted from January to July 2002. In January the murder of a prominent Russian academic Glebov, allegedly by drug addicts, served as a key event (Kepplinger and Habermeier 1995). It linked the drug problem with another social problem – mugging (especially of the elderly). There then appeared signs of what could qualify as moral panic. Here is the *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti* on February 12, 2002.

Almost half of the crime today is one way or another related to drugs. Poor pensioners are attacked in the street not by 'tough guys' (who have totally different 'objects') but by crazed Maries and Peters from around the corner who have already sold everything from their houses and now are ready to do any 'exploit' including murder to prevent the upcoming 'cold turkey' and get a 'joint'. Not so long ago we felt sorry for these Maries and Peters. Sick people, we thought, deserving not punishment but medical treatment. Numerous international organizations and parties rose to defend these pathetic junkies, demands to soften drug laws were uttered on various forums, conferences, and

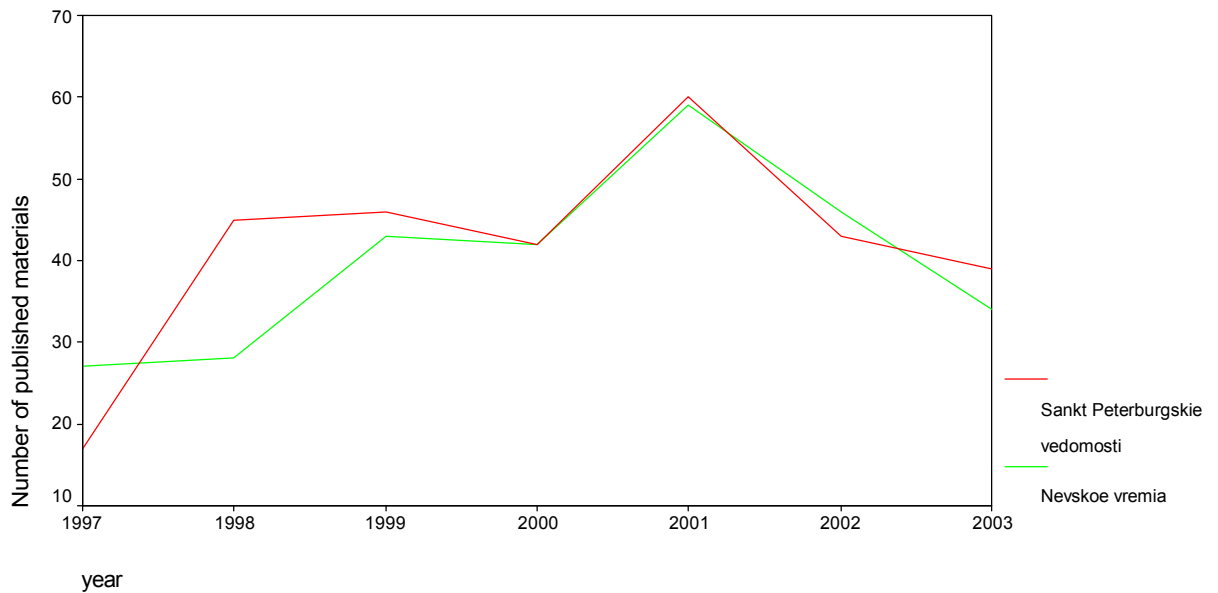
demonstrations. We must admit: drug addiction is INCURABLE by modern means. All that is sold to us as a result of the treatment is only so called remission, that is, temporary retreat of the disease. The only way of fighting drug addiction and crimes related to it is COMPLETE ISOLATION of drug addicts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

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that by and large such a reaction was not typical of the local press. A more restrained and ambivalent position to the drug user as both victimizer and victim was more characteristic. One of the distinctive features of moral panics is demonization of groups that responsibility for the situation (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Hier 2003). Yet, such demonization of drug addicts took place in the Saint Petersburg press for only a short period. Nevertheless, the discursive strategies of the Saint Petersburg newspapers were very similar to those of their national counterparts. Most obviously, both attempted to define the situation as a 'catastrophic' problem compromising national security.

We need to consider whether this claim was valid. A full assessment is beyond the scope of this paper but available evidence attests to the contrary. According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA 2002) in 2002 lifetime experience of cannabis use was reported to vary from 10 % (Finland) to 25 to 30 % (Denmark and the United Kingdom) of the whole adult population, with a substantial number of European countries reporting figures of around 20 % (Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland and the Netherlands). The figures for those who tried other drugs are significantly lower. In America, the country that implements one of the harshest drug policies in the Western world, 34% of adults reported lifetime experience of cannabis and 11% of cocaine (SAMHSA 2000). By comparison, in 2000 in Saint Petersburg, according to Russian researchers Keselman and Matskevich (2001), 18.5% of the residents reported their lifetime drug use. 6.5% of the city population tried drugs once or couple of times, and 6.5% used drugs previously on a relatively regular basis but later ceased using drugs. The remaining third described their current drug use. Most who tried drugs used

cannabis. 13.1% of Russian adolescents reported their recent drug use (Chepurnikh 2004) as compared to 5 – 15% of young adults in Europe.

Figure 13. 2 Drug-related articles in two leading Saint Petersburg newspapers 1997-2003



However, these figures are in stark contrast to those reported by the local and national media. For instance, it was reported that there were regions in Russia where virtually all young people aged from 18 to 23 were addicted to drugs (*Vecherniy Peterburg*, 3.11. 2000); and that in Saint Petersburg the number of drug addicts amounted to 400,000 people, almost one in ten of the city's total population, (*Vecherniy Peterburg*, 12.02.2003), or that more than 13 million drug addicts resided in Russia (*Nevskoe vremia*, 31.01.2003). Such a 'rhetoric of calamity' was a necessary discursive ritual for conveying almost any information about drugs.

The construction of the heightened danger of drug use by media

Discursive strategies designed to foster a heightened sense of danger from drug use were common to both the national and local press. Four seemed particularly important.

1 *Signification spiral* (Hall and Jefferson 1976). In this process one or more social problems are presented as progressively more threatening. So a drug problem becomes an epidemic, then a 'plague' or 'national disaster'. A related process is convergence which occurs 'when two or more activities are linked in the process of signification as to implicitly or explicitly draw parallels between them...In both cases, the net effect is amplification, not in the real events being described but in their potential threat for society' (Hall et al. 1978:223). For instance, in the Russian press two lexemes have been especially popular: *narkoterrorism* (drug terrorism) that implies that those who sell drugs are tantamount to terrorists, and *narkointerventsia* (drug intervention), which emphasizes the 'non-Russian' and imported character of drug use, thereby linking drug use with invasion and occupation.

2 *Automatic problematization*. This occurs when the drug problem becomes connected to other social problems such as crime and AIDS. Automatic problematization differs from convergence in that the latter refers to a form of signification while the former links two conditions with each other, not semantically but causally. I call such problematization automatic because the magnitude of these satellite problems is automatically and self-evidently set in direct relation with number of drug users, whilst other possible causes are all but neglected. For instance, it is postulated that the number of HIV-positive persons grows *only* because the number of drug users is on the rise. 'Fighting AIDS and fighting drug use are essentially equal in all the world' (*Nevskoe vremia*, 13.07.2001). That HIV spreads mainly because drug users share syringes and other drug paraphernalia, and that the epidemic could be checked by organizing syringe exchange programs, was largely ignored at the height of the drug panic.

The same holds true for crime. All so-called 'drug crime' was reported to be dependent only on the number of drug users, even though much of such crime was a consequence of the *laws* regulating drug use rather than drug use itself. Highlighting the relation between drugs and AIDS was more typical of the Saint Petersburg press, whereas the national press placed more

emphasis on automatic problematization. 'Relating the spread of drug use to the growth of juvenile crime is *self-evident*: one evil begets the other. It is known that a person, who gets addicted to drugs, is a person without future. But it would be more correct to say that such a person has a criminal future, which threatens the whole society' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 20.3.1998, emphasis added). Also, in the period that immediately preceded the onset of the drugs moral panic, the Saint Petersburg media were much more in favour of syringe exchange programs than the national media.

However, as the moral panic developed, such ideas faded from the media discourse, despite continued growth in the prevalence and incidence of HIV. For example, in a feature article to commemorate AIDS victims in *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti* on May 16, 2002, (at the height of the moral panic), there was not a single reference to syringe exchange programs although the issue had appeared regularly two years earlier. It seems that the newspaper was unwilling even to mention measures so unpopular in that period. Yet, from the second half of 2002 when the moral panic began to decline, the issue started appearing again.

3 Categorization work. In this discursive strategy all people that use any drugs no matter how frequently are ascribed to one category – 'drug addicts'. This situation is analogous to one that exists in criminal and medical discourses, where a 'drug addict' and a person who has tried or uses any drug, no matter how rarely, are virtually the same. In criminal discourse it is because he /she committed or continues to commit such crimes as the acquisition and possession of drugs; and in medical discourse it is because, having tried drugs, this person has taken an irreversible step towards drug addiction with dependence just a question of time. Not to try drugs is the only way not to become a drug addict. Taking into account that the drug addict is allegedly prepared to do anything to get a fix ('drug addicts suffering from "cold turkey" readily commit murder to procure a "potion" ', *Nevskoe vremia* 28.11.2003), and that he/she 'infects' 7-10 people a year (*Chas Pik* 06.10.2002), the situation really looks catastrophic. Indeed, in 2003 it is reported (*Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 10.09.2003) that there are 4 million drug addicts

in Russia. Simple arithmetic shows that in 2004 there will be 40 million people ready for anything to get a fix. By 2005 the number would be 400 million, twice the total Russian population.

4 Selective typification. When presenting crimes related to drug use, the mass media cover mostly grave crimes such as murder and write about them extensively; in so doing, they try to present such crimes as typical of drug users while in reality the proportion of drug users who committed such crimes is very small (Rusakova 2000).

Mobilization strategies of mass media

The agents or moral entrepreneurs participating in the construction of a moral panic about drugs must not only demonstrate the various dangers of drug use but also attempt to mobilize society for a battle with the evil. Hence, the importation of mobilization strategies. Ibarra and Kitsuse define rhetorical idioms as complexes of definitions that utilize language in order to situate problematized condition-categories in moral universes (1993: 34). Thus, '...the rhetoric of calamity is distinguished by being composed of metaphors and reasoning practices that evoke unimagability of utter disaster' (1993: 41). Such rhetoric is also supposed to unite all agents competing in the social problems market under one umbrella since all other problems turned out to be logically subordinate to the one that is pregnant with inevitable catastrophe. Those who employ such rhetoric for a war on drugs are pursuing the goal of mobilizing and closing the ranks of both the general public and official institutions.. Both the Saint Petersburg and the national media used such rhetoric extensively. 'Why pay so much attention now to the economy, if in twenty years Russia will turn into a colony of drug addicts?' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 19.3.1999). 'I don't understand what the leaders of the country or the city think now. They build the Ice Palace, roads, monuments...But in a little while we will need only one kind of construction sites – graveyards, if we don't attend to youth problems right away' (*Nevskoe vremia*, 30.05.2001).

The second mobilization strategy is direct mobilization – calls to organize ‘committees of responsible citizens’, and to ring various drug control agencies to report not only those who are suspected in drug selling but drug users as well. (‘Call the police for your neighbour’s sake’, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 26.2.1999). The fact that such calls can be a means for settling personal scores is completely ignored in the heat of the battle. Such direct mobilization was advocated less often in Saint Petersburg than in Russia as a whole.

Personification of evil

Social problem construction consists not only of constructing conditions but also of constructing putative people that are attributed a role of a causal agent of the condition’s harm (Looseke 1993, 2003). Thus, along with society’s mobilization for battle with the evil, personification of this evil is also necessary. Any moral panic is accompanied by the construction of ‘folk devils’ i.e. those who are personally responsible for the situation. Drug use is a complex phenomenon conditioned by a range of social, cultural, and political factors. Personification of evil serves simultaneously to dramatize and concretize the situation (making the evil look simple and clear). Hence, the construction of the drug addict as embodiment of evil helps to divert attention from complex structural and institutional aspects of social reality and reduce the problem to simply one of extermination, isolation, or the resocialization of personality. Gusfield, discussing the construction of the drinking-driving problem, writes that ‘to build excitement and narrative around such objects as safety belts, auto design, alcohol availability, and user friendly roads may be possible but seems to lack the possibilities of villainy that the drinking-driving drama contains’. (1989: 434). Besides, on such ‘folk devils’ can be heaped the blame for other social problems (Reinarman and Levine 1995), for instance, the harsh economic situation or the shortage of conscripts in the Russian army.

The construction of the ‘other’ in the case of the drug problem has a number of peculiar traits, different from those that can be seen in other discourses of exclusion e.g. ethnic discourse. In discourses of exclusion ‘they’ are strangers from the outside who have transgressed the

physical boundaries of the community. In the media discourse on drugs 'they' are a transmuted 'we', who have slighted and infringed the community's moral boundaries. At any minute anyone of 'us' may become one of 'them' ('In fact, every family is in danger now', *Nevskoe vremia*, 8.4.2000). Sometimes, it allegedly happens against the will of the victim – a mutagenic substance (drug) is injected by force. Neither money nor 'good family' can prevent this misfortune. ('Americans have concluded that the probability that a child would become a drug addict was the same for the president's family and for the alcoholic's family', *Chas Pik*, 29.8.2001). But the chance that one of 'them' can become one of 'us' again is negligible. ('Only one out of hundred drug addicts is cured. And even this lucky one may at any time relapse back to drug use', *Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 21.4. 2000). Two main dangers 'they' represent are being prepared to do anything for a fix and 'infecting' others.

Despite this set of common features in constructing the image of the drug addict in the Saint Petersburg and the national press, there were also significant differences. Thus, when portraying the drug addict the national press used a much more emotional and sometimes hysterical tone and language, calling drug addicts 'genetic moral degenerates' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 12.10.2000), or 'criminals or potential criminals' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 31.10.1998) ready to betray or kill at any minute (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 30.10.1998). The local print media adopted a more moderate and ambivalent position towards drug users as victimizers and victims. Despite all the 'terrible deeds' that drug addicts commit, it was often emphasized that they are 'our sick children' (*Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 26.06.2002). This was the biggest difference between the two.

Overall, the moral panic about drug use was very brief, in Saint Petersburg only the first few months of 2002. It was also incomplete. Although, as might be expected in a moral panic, the drug situation was often depicted as catastrophic, the systematic demonization of drug users was not apparent. Without such demonization, another key criterion for a moral panic, hostility towards the offending group, could not be realized.

Legitimation of the definition of the situation

Finally, the constructed definition of the situation must be legitimized, which was accomplished in two ways. The first legitimation strategy of mass media was an appeal to experts' opinions. Experts and the mass media are at each other's service (Thompson 1998; Hall et al. 1978). The mass media objectify experts' opinions and give them the legitimacy of public exposure. The reverse process takes place when the mass media claim to speak on the public's behalf, whereupon official agencies can refer to the media's views as legitimate and 'real' public opinion. As a result, the media reproduce the experts' positions and the experts reproduce those of the media. In the case of the drug problem, such experts for the most part were representatives of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Public Health, who, as a rule, pointed to the catastrophic character of the situation and came out in favor of taking harsh, sometimes draconian measures.

One of the main points over which these two professional groups differed was the curability of drug addiction. To own a problem is to have the right to name it and to be able to suggest something that can be done about it (Gusfield 1989:433). Knowledge of such recipes is a profession's license to own the problem. For that reason, even at the height of the drug scare, representatives of the medical profession kept saying that drug addiction was not a hopeless business, though to explain the very modest results of state rehabilitation programs, they had to stress that treatment was a hard and complicated process, without guaranteed outcomes. The medical profession had to insist that drug addiction was curable in order to maintain their professional jurisdiction over the problem. Before and after the brief panic, that view was accepted. But during the panic itself an alternative view was accepted that, since drug addiction was incurable, it was justified to arrest and imprison those involved. This, of course, passes jurisdiction to a quite different group: repressive institutions of social control, such as the police and Federal Drug Control Agency. 'The best [drug use] prevention is to arrest drug users and drug dealers as almost one hundred percent of those who mug pensioners procure money for a

fix by this way, says deputy chief of the city criminal police Andrey Kemenev' (*Nevskoe vremia*, 21.2.2002).

Also, the drug users themselves are often accredited with an expert role, albeit ambiguous and imperfect. If they say something which confirms dominant discourses, they are legitimized them as a people 'from the street' who know the problem firsthand. But if they articulate anything contradicting dominant discourses, their pronouncements are declared 'junk myths' or deliberate dissemination of the drug mafia's lies.

The second strategy employed to legitimate the press definition of the drug situation was attempted elimination of any definitions which challenged those of the media or primary definers (Hall et al. 1977), such as the police and medical professions. As a rule, media claims-makers utilized expressions such as 'everybody knows', 'in all countries', 'it is obvious', 'it is natural to assume' and the like, in this manner trying to neutralize discussion, to show the self-evident and indisputable character of their definition of reality, to monopolize the discourse and marginalize alternatives.

Everything that contravened media and primary definers' positions was declared mythical and discarded without further consideration. Statements were frequent that referred to some mysterious forces that tried to liberalize the extant legislature, albeit the 'forces' themselves were virtually absent in media discourse in the period of moral panic. Moreover, the opponents were often vilified as criminals who were engaged in propaganda in favour of drug use (which is against Russian law), and/or were on the drug mafia's payroll. Hence potential counter-discourses were delegitimised. Such counter discourses might acknowledge that drug problems can be solved or alleviated not only by reduction of number of drug users but also by other measures (minimizing harm related to drug use). They might also focus attention on drug laws and their respective harm and renounce the 'war on drugs' policy. A primary motive for

criminalization lies in the moral domain because those driving the moral panic wish to protect moral boundaries, not challenge them.

That is why, for instance, in an address by the Russian Parliament to the United Nations of October 30, 1999 the problem of legalization or decriminalization of drugs is equated with the problem of drug use and abuse. 'The problem of drug abuse, legalization of drugs is in the class of problems that threaten to annihilate the human civilization' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 10.30.1999). In this respect the position of the Saint Petersburg media was different from the national press since it resisted branding counter discourses as necessarily produced by drug barons.

Conclusion

Let us draw some conclusions. We can assert that the interest of the national and local press in the drug problem declined from 2001 onwards and by 2003 was at the level of 1998. Despite definitions of a 'catastrophic' drug problem in Saint Petersburg, concern did not generally assume the form of a moral panic, since one of its essential characteristics was absent or present insufficiently – the construction of 'folk devil' or demonization of drug users. Nevertheless, for a short period at the beginning of 2002 such demonization was evident, so that briefly media discourse resembled a moral panic.

In this study a number of media discursive strategies directed to the construction of the heightened danger of drug use were determined. These included: signification spiral, automatic problematization, categorization work, and selective typification. The mobilization strategies of the mass media were also established, such as a rhetoric of calamity intended to unite all agencies competing in the social problems market under a single umbrella, and the strategy of direct mobilization – invitations to ring to various drug control agencies. Whereas for the national Russian press demonization of the drug user was typical, the Saint Petersburg press regarded the drug user more ambivalently, as both victimizer and victim.

Legitimation of the media's definition of the situation was accomplished by appeals to experts' opinions and attempts to eliminate competing definitions. An expert role was attributed to agents of drug control institutions, medical personnel, and drug users themselves. Additionally, in contrast to their national colleagues, the Saint Petersburg press did not make attempts to criminalize counter-discourses. More recently, as the medicalized view of drug addiction regained ground, the national press has reverted to a view closer to that of the Saint Petersburg press. But the field of discourse could easily be destabilized again in the future.

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