

Afghanistan Heroin Drives Drug Epidemic in Russia

by Rachel Douglas

Feb. 19—In a survey of the world illegal drug trade in 1996, *EIR* identified the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union and the former socialist bloc in Eastern Europe as Dope, Inc.'s fastest-growing expansion market. The overnight imposition of radical free-market policies in those countries opened them up for a hugely expanded role in drug transshipment from production areas into Europe, as well as for an explosion of addiction among their own abruptly impoverished and displaced populations.

By the middle of this decade, as Afghanistan narcotics production surged after 2001 (see article, this section), international health organizations supporting HIV treatment and control programs inside Russia reported a new pattern within an alarming epidemic: Among the HIV-AIDS hotspots in the country were not only port cities like St. Petersburg, or Moscow, the capital, but also cities deep in the Russian interior. Towns on the lower Volga River such as Samara, Saratov, Volgograd, and the auto industry center of Togliatti began to show HIV prevalence rates in excess of 1% or even 2% of the population. They are on the waterway and road transport routes from Afghanistan. A great majority of the HIV-AIDS victims were young injecting drug users.

A series of reports and proposals made in the past three months by Victor Ivanov, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's deputy chief of staff at the Kremlin, and now head of the Federal Drug Control Agency, have situated the overwhelmingly Afghanistan-origin drug epidemic as a top public-health and national-security issue for Russia. Bringing the picture up to date at a Feb. 12 press conference, held at the Itar-Tass news agency, Ivanov said: "The increase in the number of drug addicts in Russia is beginning to look like an epidemic. Each day, over 80 people die from drugs and more than 250 become drug addicts."

There are 537,000 officially registered drug users in Russia, but Ivanov cited estimates by international agencies that are five times higher. "Around 90% of the

drug addicts in Russia are addicted to Afghan opiates; are hooked on the 'Afghan needle,'" he said.

In a December 2008 interview with the government daily *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Ivanov showed starkly how the drug plague which has swept Russia contributes to the country's steep population decline. From a level of nearly 150 million people at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the population of the Russian Federation has fallen to under 142 million. Most of those 537,000 registered drug addicts, Ivanov noted, are young. Looking back eight years to 2001, the number of registered drug addicts in Russia was 496,000, but the majority of the 2001 group have died. According to Ivanov, 90% of Russian drug addicts have Hepatitis C and 75% have HIV/AIDS. He gives the life expectancy of a newly identified drug addict as five to six years.

But the total numbers are greatly understated; statistics on traffic stops show that as few as 3% of drivers stopped in a state of narcotic intoxication are registered as addicts. At Feb. 18 State Duma hearings on the data from Ivanov's agency, Speaker of the Duma Boris Gryzlov said, "Since 1990, drug consumption in Russia has grown almost tenfold, and is currently eight times higher than in the European Union."

Quantifying the flood of opium and heroin out of Afghanistan into and through Russia, Ivanov said that 29 tons of narcotics had been seized in Russia as of December, with 10-15 shipments being caught daily. He subsequently gave an updated year-end figure of 38 tons of drugs seized, including 3.5 tons of heroin.

Ivanov told *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* in December that he does not favor increased cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan, which he termed a narco-state, because opium cultivation has boomed in that country, since the beginning of the NATO operation there. For counterterrorism purposes, Ivanov suggested, what's needed are serious special service operations, not an occupation by 60,000 troops. At that time, he also cited information

received on British-linked South Asian narcotics kingpin Dawood Ibrahim's role in the Mumbai, India terror attacks, as a case in point on the need to shut down the Afghanistan opium trade; he also highlighted the role of narcoterrorists in Russia's North Caucasus, a major area of intense activity by London- and Saudi-supported separatist networks. "In Russia, as well, terrorism cannot be overcome without liquidation of the drug shipments out of Afghanistan," said Ivanov.

Ivanov told *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* on Jan. 30 that the Russian government desires to work with the new U.S. Administration in Afghanistan to fight drug trafficking. Noting the spread of drug crops and trafficking from southern Afghanistan to the whole area along the border with the Central Asian countries, Ivanov said, "To reduce this danger, we are vitally interested in working with the new American Administration."

This proposal for U.S.-Russia collaboration, as *EIR* reported Feb. 6, was heartily endorsed by Lyndon LaRouche, who emphasizes that the only way to stabilize the world strategic situation, is for the U.S. to get out of Afghanistan militarily (except for a presence around the capital), and to wage an all-out war on drugs. "Either

we stop the drug trafficking, or we lose civilization," LaRouche said.

In the Jan. 30 interview, Ivanov called for convening a conference under UN auspices on "Peace and Prosperity in Afghanistan," as a "first step" in such U.S.-Russian collaboration against drugs. "It would be appropriate to hold such a conference in Afghanistan itself, e.g., in Kabul," said Ivanov. All tribes, areas, and political forces "prepared for a constructive dialogue" should be invited, he said, proposing a special role for Russia, as a country "whose forces have not participated in this seven-years-long war." Ivanov said that creation of a "single, independent, and strong nation of Afghanistan" would be the pathway to tackling the explosion of the heroin business.

The language of Ivanov's Peace and Prosperity conference appeal closely echoes a Russian policy discussion paper, published at the end of last year by the Institute for Demography, Migration and Regional Development, under the title, "The Path to Peace and Concord in Afghanistan Will Be Determined by the Position Russia Takes." The just-issued English edition is excerpted in the pages that follow.