

# Hold the vodka: Russians cut drinking 40 percent under Putin

October 1 2019

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Russians might have a reputation as a nation of hard drinkers, but a report by the World Health Organization published Tuesday showed their alcohol consumption has dropped by more than 40 percent from its

peak in the early 2000s.

The WHO put the decrease down to a raft of measures brought in since sport-loving President Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, including restrictions on alcohol sales and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

"The Russian Federation has long been considered one of the heaviest-drinking countries in the world," the report said, adding that alcohol was a major contributor to a spike in deaths in the 1990s.

"However, in recent years these trends have been reversed."

The study showed a 43 percent drop in alcohol consumption per capita from 2003 to 2016, driven by a steep decline in the consumption of bootleg booze.

The authors said this trend was a factor in increased life expectancies, which reached a historic peak in 2018, at 78 years for women and 68 years for men. In the turbulent early 1990s, male life expectancy was just 57.

Under Putin, Russia has introduced measures including a ban on shops selling any alcohol after 11:00 pm, increases in the minimum retail price of spirits and an advertising blackout.

## **'More civilised'**

In a central Moscow bar that specialises in beer, drinkers said they thought people were cutting down partly because of the restrictions, particularly on late-night alcohol sales in shops, but also due to changing lifestyles.

"We drink less, at least some of us," said Alexander Sukhontsov, a

28-year-old bank employee, adding that people's busy schedules mean they "just don't have the time".

"People have changed their approach to drinking," said Roman Pechnikov, a 38-year-old computer scientist.

"Bars have become more civilised, and people do not drink until the end of the night," he said.

Last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was so concerned at habitual drinking among workers that he led a massively unpopular anti-alcohol campaign with partial prohibition, which brought down consumption from the mid-1980s until 1990.

But after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, alcohol consumption exploded, continuing to rise until the start of the 2000s. President Boris Yeltsin was also notorious for embarrassing public incidents that appeared to be alcohol-fuelled.

By contrast, Putin is almost never seen drinking in public, although he is not teetotal and this month raised a glass of vodka while visiting the North Caucasus.

Earlier WHO figures showed Russian adults now drink less alcohol on average than their French and German counterparts.

Moscow has also launched a drive against smoking, last week announcing a ban on lighting up even on private balconies.

Tobacco use plummeted by more than a fifth between 2009 and 2016, down to 30 percent of Russians smoking, according to the most recent Global Adult Tobacco Survey.

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Citation: Hold the vodka: Russians cut drinking 40 percent under Putin (2019, October 1)  
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-10-russian-alcohol-consumption.html>

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