

Moscow hosted the international conference on smokers' rights

Komsomolskaya Pravda, 02.10.2014

<http://www.kp.ru/daily/26288/3166880/>

I was "only" six hours late for the opening of the conference. There was a small group of young people at the entrance to the Baltschug Hotel, who were boldly smoking in violation of the ban on smoking in public places. I thought this is exactly how supporters of smokers' rights should look.

- Do you happen to know where the conference on smokers' rights is taking place? - I asked them.

- It's here! – young ladies and gentlemen told me, exhaling tobacco smoke from their nostrils.

- And you are...?

- Yes, we are conference participants! – they proudly replied.

We introduced ourselves. Supporters of smokers' rights turned out to be nice, easy-going people. One of them, Miro, was from Italy and the rest were Russians. But as I learned later conference participants also included delegates from Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine (despite its problems which are much more serious than smoking bans), Peru, Indonesia, Spain, and Italy. A total of 21 countries are willing to change the societal attitude to smokers (there are 250 million smokers in all of these countries! And in Russia, more than 40 million people smoke!)

How it all started

The tough and irreconcilable anti-smoking campaign has deep historical roots. It started a long time ago, when there was almost nothing to smoke in Europe! A member of Columbus' crew Rodrigo de Jerez was put in jail for his love for tobacco with the anti-scientific wording: "Only the devil could give a man the power to exhale smoke from nostrils." However, at the beginning of the 17th century there appeared more activists and supporters of smoking because tobacco earned good revenues both for producers and the government. Meanwhile, Russia imposed a ban on tobacco smoking and leaf growing. The ban was cancelled only in 1685 by Peter the Great for a hefty fee from the Anglo-Virginia company trading in American tobacco (Peter I "sold" us for a pinch of snuff!).

I sometimes see how anti-smoking activists ruthlessly pour water on smokers or snatch cigarettes out of their mouths. Thank God they don't put them in jail like they did with Jerez. However, peaceful smokers never catch anti-smoking activists. Nor do they put cigarettes into their mouths by force. By the way, I do not smoke (if there's no good reason or some really good stuff to smoke). Some people think that anti-smoking activists are members of a sect with stringent rules, which divides all human beings into smoking rascals and non-smoking angels.

Gennady Seleznev, former editor-in-chief of Komsomolskaya Pravda and a prominent politician, stated at the conference: "All smoking bans introduced in our country are, in fact, social discrimination." And nobody argued with him. On the contrary, he received a big round of applause. Andrey Nechaev, former Minister of Economy, said that although the anti-smoking campaign had come to Russia from the West, today we are introducing a much more stringent anti-tobacco regulation.

And I thought with pride: "At least we have outperformed Europe in this respect. Sanctions? So what: Western smokers cannot imagine even in their wildest dreams the sanctions which Russia has imposed on its smokers! There are 135 million smokers in Indonesia. After the anti-tobacco law had been implemented, they all went to the Constitutional court! And the court took their side!

What will Russian smokers do, I wonder.

After the conference, I met Andrey Loskutov, Executive Director of the All-Russian Movement for Smokers' Rights, whom I had first met at the Russian conference on smokers' rights. We sat down in soft armchairs and without lighting up began to talk. Here's what he explained to me in simple words:

- Our main goal is to prevent discrimination of smokers in our society. In a peaceful and civilised way we need to ensure that Russia adopts the laws which balance the interests of smokers and non-smokers. We have already made some progress in this area. We have gathered 105,000 signatures – not via the Internet voting but from real people who had sent their hand-written signatures in envelopes! We made sure that the State Duma deputies are aware of this. Already today we see that the legislative bans on smoking in restaurants, cafes and on public transport are not effective and premature. They will be revised. Or take the smoking ban on trains. We submitted our proposals to the respective Ministry and received its response: yes, it is possible to allow smoking in some carriages. But will smokers agree to pay extra for the ticket to enjoy smoking on train? Now we know that most smokers will agree to do that.

- In fact, you are fighting for peace between smokers and non-smokers? – I clarified.

- Yes, you can put it this way, - Andrey agreed easily.

- Is there a memorandum signed as a result of the conference? So that the world community is aware of its outcomes.

- The key outcome is that we should take into account the experience of other markets and find solutions which balance the interests of smokers and non-smokers.

- Do you smoke? – I asked Andrey when we were parting.

- Well, if cigar smoking is smoking, then yes, I do smoke.

- When you smoke a cigarette or a cigar you exhale the smoke both from your mouth and nose! Even a non-smoker would begin coughing, - I said.

- Well, this is a different issue! Smoke is all around us. Some smoke is much more harmful than tobacco smoke. We can't ban all types of smoke, can we?

Smokers are, probably, right in some sense. The truth is they want to smoke. But the most important thing is to prevent war between smokers and tobacco opponents.