The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Drought Fuels Social Tensions

By Boris Kagarlitsky

July 21, 2010



The problem with the tropical heat that has descended on Moscow and central Russia this summer is not so much the high temperatures but the impossibility of gaining any reprieve from it.

Unfortunately, the infrastructure of Russian cities was not built for tropical heat. The crude beaches on the city's rivers are overcrowded, and people ignore river banks that are clearly marked "Bathing prohibited." People drown on a regular basis — not so much because of the swift river tides as from drinking too much alcohol.

Even computers have been affected by the heat. I realized just how serious the situation was when an article I had already written and saved was transformed into a meaningless jumble of characters.

Of course, the heat has been a boon for producers of cold drinks and ice cream, but an accompanying drought has caused huge losses in the agricultural sector. For centuries, the country's agriculture has been crippled by crop failures. That problem seemed to decline in

significance in post-Soviet Russia — not because labor productivity and agricultural technology improved, but because agricultural production plays less of a role in the economy than it did before.

In tsarist times, grain exports were just as important to the economy as oil exports are today. The Soviet Union attempted to supply all of its own food and continued exporting foodstuffs through the mid-1930s. That became impossible by the 1960s and 1970s, when crop failure became a serious problem. Foreign currency shortfalls made it difficult for Moscow to import grain. When the economy shifted to a reliance on oil and gas exports, it was considered natural for Russia to import much of its food. The country was able to import grain with petrodollars as long as the price of oil remained high.

In Russia, noncommercial farms, dacha plots and family gardens provide as much as 40 percent of all the food that is bought and sold. But this does not include the food that people consume themselves. According to sociologist Anna Ochkina, families in the Penza region grow at least one-third of their own food.

These garden plots, which are not protected by advanced agricultural technologies, are the most unprepared to cope with drought. That is why these plots are now suffering the most in the drought.

Unable to rely on their own crops, families are forced to buy more food in stores and markets. Not only does that lead to higher prices in response to increased demand, but people see their family budgets dry up before the next paycheck arrives. Hence, the direct link between the drought and increased social tensions.

Overcoming Russia's reliance on homegrown agriculture is an important prerequisite for modernization. But is Russia's conservative society — one that stresses family, religion and closeness to nature — even capable of modernizing? Of course it is, with the caveat that "innovations" prove meaningless and breakthrough technologies go to waste.

If we want a different result, we need to improve society, not technology.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/07/21/drought-fuels-social-tensions-a21