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Proletariats and Potatoes

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Despite this summer's drought, there is no threat of a Russian famine. This year's crop failure is offset by the large grain surplus from last year, and the temporary ban on wheat exports guarantees that those reserves will be used for the domestic market.

But while averting a famine, the government has not been able to stop an increase in prices. That is what President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are discussing now. The main problem, however, is not with prices per se but with salaries. The salaries of most Russians are inadequate to maintain even the skimpy standard of living they currently have. The 2010 drought and crop failure have only served to accentuate that problem and force it into the spotlight.

Russians are able to get by more or less thanks to the safety net left over from Soviet times, which includes apartments, old household electronics and automobiles together with rakushki (crude garages), all dating back to the Soviet period. But perhaps the most important survival factor is potatoes.

Home gardens, small plots of land and dachas with gardens provide a significant amount of food for the urban residents of provincial Russia. And the less money they spend on food, the more they have to buy goods from clothes to computers. Such gardens helped stimulate the consumption boom of the 2000s along with the enormous influx of petrodollars. Russians can put up with low wages because they are able to at least partially feed themselves.

Of course, garden plots existed during Soviet times, and it was then that Russia developed its peculiar gardening culture. But city dwellers were not as dependent on their dachas for survival as they are now. Paradoxically, the same market reforms that brought down the old economy also pushed millions of people back into subsistence farming. This helps explain why last year's sharp rise in unemployment did not lead to a much-expected growth in social tensions. The ideologists of the government's modernization drive constantly complain about the patriarchal and feudal traditions of the Russian people. For some reason, those ideologists do not stop to consider what kind of social turmoil the country would be subject to if Russians were more European in their thinking and behavior.

But this year's drought has radically altered this traditional formula for social stability. It destroyed thousands of individual vegetable gardens, making it impossible for the people affected to put aside food supplies for the winter. Forced to buy food at the marketplace, millions of Russians were hit over the head with the sharp rise in food prices at a time when demand increased. As typically happens in capitalism, sellers are motivated solely by a desire to maximize profits, and no amount of exhortation by the authorities can change it.

It is understandable why the authorities are getting nervous. They are faced with a new and unpredictable situation. People have always been underpaid, but their standard of living has fallen dramatically with the drought.

This fall, employees across the country will realize that they are proletariats in the classical Marxist meaning of the word. If they draw the correct conclusions from that realization, the country will change radically — and rapidly.

Boris Kagarlitsky is director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

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