The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why the Regions Hate Moscow

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August 11, 2013



A recent report by Center for Strategic Research head Mikhail Dmitriyev concludes that Russians have undergone a major attitude shift this past year. Convinced of the futility of attempts to change the country's political and social economic system through massive streets protests such as those held on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, Muscovites now suffer from "learned helplessness syndrome" and have quietly returned to their previous focus on consumerism.

Meanwhile, the center of the protest movement has shifted to the regions. It is there that the displeasure with the status quo is mounting and new hotbeds of political protest are forming.

Take, for example, the protests in early July that were held in the town of Pugachyov, population 40,000, in the Saratov region. The conflict broke out after a local former paratrooper was murdered by a young Chechen who had come to Pugachyov to visit relatives. Local residents were up in arms, and protesters blocked a federal highway. They would have seized the municipal administration building if riot police hadn't blocked them in time.

The Pugachyov disturbance brought to the surface a volatile mix of the usual xenophobia, including demands to evict all Chechens from the city and sharp discontent with the social and economic conditions in the country's provinces. In Pugachyov, the average salary is roughly 6,000 rubles ($183) per month. The city's condensed milk factory, concrete plant and other industries shut down years ago, and people see no future whatsoever for themselves or their children.

Pugachyov and the Saratov region as a whole are perfect examples of the blight and hopelessness in provincial towns, cities and regions. The Saratov region has a debt of 40 billion rubles ($1.2 billion). Its roads and social services are in ruins. Saratov, like nearly every other region in the country, is withering away because of lack of funding, poverty, closed factories and no jobs. The only things that are increasing in these regions are alcoholism, domestic violence, crime and drug abuse.

Embittered and impoverished Russians are ready to blame the decline of their cities and regions not only on migrants, foreigners, people from the North Caucasus, gays and lesbians, but to an even greater degree on local regional and federal authorities. After initially demanding the eviction of all Chechens from the town, angry protesters added to their list of demands: raising salaries, lowering utility rates, creating new jobs, restoring municipal infrastructure such as roads and street lighting and improving medical care.

The growing resentment in the provinces demonstrates the fundamental problems of the Kremlin's "power vertical" and the concentration of most of the country's wealth in just one city, Moscow. It was inevitable that this would increase political and ethnic tensions in the regions and that protests would break out.

According to the Center for Strategic Research study, 43 percent of the population in Russia's regions is prepared to take to the streets in protest in the very likely event that the social and economic situation declines still further. In cities with populations of more than 1 million people, the figure is still higher: 63 percent. But in Moscow, where income levels are higher, that number today stands at just 15 percent.

Over the past decade, Moscow has increased its siphoning of wealth from the provinces. The federal budget claims 65 percent of the country's consolidated revenues and leaves only the remaining 35 percent to 83 regions and more than 20,000 municipalities.

That means the federal budget has 13 trillion rubles ($400 billion) in revenue, while the 83 regions have a combined revenue of only 8 trillion rubles ($244 billion). To make matters worse, the regions are buried in 1.4 trillion rubles ($42 billion) in combined debt. This is a significant factor behind the poverty in Pugachyov and thousands of other regional cities and towns.

Even while federal authorities permit themselves lavish and unfettered spending for luxury cars, access to elite health care facilities, construction of swanky new buildings, high salaries and a never-ending increase in the size of the state bureaucracy, regional authorities do not have enough money to install street lighting, repair water pipes or solve the problem of a sharp shortage of doctors and substandard health care in general.

Amid this regional blight, the federal government has implemented mega-projects that have

broken world records for exceeding costs and corruption, including the recent Universiade in Kazan, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the absolutely unnecessary high-speed rail line from Moscow to Kazan. Authorities are also considering digging a tunnel from the undeveloped mainland to Sakhalin Island.

In the absence of a democratically elected and independent parliament and lacking governors who are independent from Moscow and answerable to citizens, the people who are trapped in poverty-stricken and hopeless provinces have only one way to make themselves heard: protesting in the streets against the federal elite who have usurped the nation's wealth.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/11/why-the-regions-hate-moscow-a26680