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Russia's War on Food May Be Step Too Far

By Nikolai Epple

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Russian authorities are carrying out this destruction of food as if it was a completely ordinary police measure. But this is no ordinary measure. This is demonstrative barbarity, an insult to society, and a refusal to see the most important ethical side of the issue.

This measure was proposed by the Agriculture Ministry at the end of July. President Vladimir Putin signed a corresponding decree on July 29.

Russia's agricultural watchdog, Rosselkhoznadzor, announced the elimination of its first batch of banned goods shortly afterward — several hundred tons worth — while emphasizing that these were as yet "small amounts." What's behind this demonstrative war on food?

One theory, that the measures are intended to further mobilize the public by bolstering a siege mentality, is not very sound, says Alexei Levinson of independent pollster the Levada Center. There isn't any need at the moment for additional mobilization, as the public still has faith in the country's leadership.

At the same time, this order is pushing some pretty hot buttons, and the main audience is actually those segments of the population loyal to the government, who are already feeling the effects of rising food prices.

It seems we are looking at a combination of factors leading to outcomes unforeseen by the authorities behind these plans.

On the one hand, the destruction of foodstuffs is often entirely justified, and is, moreover, established practice in Russia and abroad. This relates primarily to expired foods or those not meeting sanitary standards.

Contraband food products on the market also create problems at every stage; it's unclear, for example, who would be responsible if these goods were found to be lacking in quality.

There are many violations of the embargo. According to Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, there are about 700-800 open cases related to such violations, which is why all participants in the process — exporters, suppliers and customs agents — need a demonstration of severity from the state.

But one of the downsides of fomenting public hysteria is that it's difficult to pull the brakes on that PR train once it leaves the station. It is unacceptable to criticize the president.

Those carrying out his orders want to show their full support, and interested parties just want to ride the trend (the CEO of incinerator producer Turmalin, for example, has announced delivery of 20 mobile incinerators to border checkpoints, with only 400 remaining points left to equip), leading to further escalation.

The habitual public campaign in support of a government order has, in this case, run into a situation clearly perceived by many as absurd: a demonstrative war on food against the backdrop of an economic crisis.

The Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights and priests from the Russian Orthodox Church have spoken out against this practice, and a petition on Change.org demanding that the decree be repealed and banned food given to the needy collected over 100,000 signatures in a single day (by 8 p.m. the next day that figure was 220,000).

Anatoly Aksakov, chair of the State Duma committee on economic policy, voiced his support for the idea, and the president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov promised to inform Putin about the petition.

Nikolai Epple is a columnist at Vedomosti. This comment originally appeared in Vedomosti.

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