

Why Russian Pensioners Won't Self-Isolate

Russian pensioners believe that they alone know how to survive through life's hardships.

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Sergei Savostyanov / TASS

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin signed a decree this week ordering Moscow's nearly 2 million people aged 65 or older to self-isolate.

The authorities promised to arrange the home delivery of food and medicines to them, forgive their debts on utilities bills, and maintain their telephone and Internet service. They also promised to make a one-time payment of 4,000 rubles (approximately \$50 at the current exchange rate) to each as compensation for expenses stemming from the quarantine.

A walk through the streets of Moscow, however, reveals that the elderly are still outdoors

everywhere. You can see them in half-empty metro cars, in buses and trams, and sitting on commuter trains heading to their dachas carrying seedlings and hoes.

You can see them in discount supermarkets and pharmacies and at post offices and banks where they can still receive their monthly pension payments in cash. In all these places and more, pensioners will continue to gather in groups and stand together in lines, regardless of official calls for social distancing.

You won't see the elderly in expensive boutiques, taxies, bars, or restaurants, but only because they didn't frequent such places before the crisis either. The overwhelming majority of Russian retirees live on miniscule pensions. They must survive on less money per peer than a young Muscovite spends on two mugs of trendy craft beer.

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Why don't they stay home? Did no one inform of the threat? Of course, state-controlled TV and radio have offered only sparing coverage of the crisis, but no doubt everyone knows about the coronavirus by now.

Are they unaware of the mayor's decree? Unlikely. Announcements have been posted in every apartment building stairwell.

Actually, they sincerely believe that the pandemic will not affect them, that they can cope with any adversity and survive any crisis.

People over 65 were born before 1955. In the West, they are called "baby boomers," but the post-war generation in Russia grew up in a very different reality.

The Iron Curtain slammed shut, Stalinist repressions returned, even WWII heroes found themselves serving long sentences in the GULAG, and there were frequent shortages of food, meaning that if you lost your ration card, you were in for a terrible nightmare. These were hard and hungry years.

Street gangs — equipped with some of the hundreds of thousands of firearms that had found their way into the post-war population — replaced the more harmless pickpockets. Then Stalin died and millions of people returned home from the forced labor camps. All across the country, this trend blurred the lines between prison culture and ordinary city life.

The language of thugs became the new lingua franca. Now, when President Vladimir Putin, who was born in 1952, wants to show that he is "one with the people," he drops or word or two from his early days on the Leningrad streets.

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Back then, there was almost nothing in the stores, food was rationed, women had to sew their own dresses, and people patched torn pants and used extra insoles to block holes in the soles of their shoes. It was a time when people constructed homemade furniture from planks of

wood and when mushroom hunting and fishing were basic survival measures.

True, life grew more tolerable under Khrushchev and Brezhnev — but not for long. No sooner had this generation reached its midlife crisis than everything turned upside down again. There was perestroika, food rationing, the collapse of socialism and the Soviet Union, market reforms, privatization — and, once again, street gangs and shootings.

People went back to patching up worn pants and gathering mushrooms. And, almost like Rambo, they did not lose faith in the basic survival instincts they had learned in childhood.

For this reason, they believe that they alone, as the oldest living generation, know how to survive. The fact that they have already lived through so many trials proves that their approach works.

In their view, it is the namby-pamby youth of today who cannot fend for themselves, who have succumbed to the siren call of the West.

Their males are not real men who can use their fists when needed, and all of them have lost faith in the folk traditions and comforting superstitions of the past. Why get all worked up over talk of quarantine?

Better to go to the store and buy an extra supply of buckwheat. That option has never failed.

This situation bears some similarity to Chernobyl. The virus, like radiation, is invisible, and Russia's elderly are once again operating under the mistaken notion that their life experience has somehow prepared them for this. In fact, they have never encountered such a problem before, but they are unwilling to admit this possibility.

Only a new approach based on empathy and solidarity can overcome the current challenge: the rugged individualism of the past won't do.

Life, however, did not prepare Russia's older generation for displays of empathy. On the contrary, they believe that life beat them down and hurt them deeply, teaching them that you can only rely on yourself.

Now, they vent all that bitterness on their children and grandchildren who plead with them to sit at home in quarantine. "You can sit all you want," these grumpy old Rambos reply, "I'm going down to the post office to pick up my pension."

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