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Russia, Factor 17: Good Governance

Russia: Good Governance & Agricultural Output

According to cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (“Margaret Mead Quotes”). Such citizens exist today, but they can be hard to find. Becoming a lazy, go-with-the flow citizen is easy. However, it is clear today that Russian citizens want change, and the situation they want to see change in is the annexation of the Crimea by Russia. Russia is the largest country on earth, with a long, and sometimes tumultuous, history. It has gained and then lost the Crimea, which is currently part of Ukraine. Russia dominates northern Asia, while Ukraine is an Eastern European country, and the two nations share a border. The region called the Crimea is a peninsula on the southern tip of Ukraine, which extends into the Black Sea. Today, citizens in Russia are looking to the government to do the right thing. Yet, when the Western nations slammed down their sanctions to retaliate against Russia and its undeclared war on Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin responded by self-imposing a food import ban on Russia. Was this a necessary action? According to an anonymous Russian, “Why am I, personally, against the war? Almost every day I see how regular citizens of my country suffer from a lack of rights and from fear of the government and its representatives. Despite a lengthy period of economic growth, Russia’s citizens are still, on the whole, very poor. A decade of boisterous growth has led to fantastic inequality and stratification because for Putin it is easier to manage two hundred billionaires who control the entire economy. Which, in turn, creates a lack of opportunities. I understood a long time ago that democracy, freedom of speech, local government, and improving the citizens’ quality of life are in direct conflict with Putin’s desire to endlessly consolidate his own power” (“Why Vladimir Putin Needs a Poor, Aggressive Russia”). The author of this article is clearly a citizen who wants to take action, yet he/she feels lost, hopeless, and betrayed. The priorities of the Russian government need to change, and it can change by defining the proper role of its citizens, its own institutions, and by expanding a long-neglected part of its economy: the agricultural sector.

1. Russian Standards of Living

In general, Russian families are small, typically with three to four members including the parents. While food is abundant, it is expensive, and families with fixed, small wages will eat more starch-rich foods than anything else because they are all the family can access. While education is valued highly, it is also expensive (“Russia.”). It is mandatory for all citizens to attend nine years of school, and then advance to either technical school, college, or upper secondary schooling. However, rural schools may not offer as many opportunities as urban schools, and this has led to problems in terms of educational costs, quality, and opportunities for advancement (“Russia.”). These two obstacles- over-priced food and education- represents a “double-whammy” for the impoverished population of Russia, which makes up 13% of Russia’s population (Gordon). Another problem is health care. While it is free, it is also poor quality, facing a lack of modern medical equipment and medicine (“Russia.”). If a citizen does not meet with their doctor at the appointed time, they must stand in a long queue that can last hours, and if the hospital’s business hours end, they are expected to return the next day. Most hospitals are understaffed as well (“Health Care in Russia.”). Meager healthcare has led to poor knowledge of good health in Russia, and there is emphasis on eating animal products over fresh fruits and vegetables (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).

Most Russians live rurally, in desolate villages ravaged by corruption, poverty, bad roads, and substance abuse (Budjeryn). For those who grow their own food, their household plot may only be 1.5 hectares in size, or roughly 3.7 acres (Wegren). Nevertheless, what really matters is the quality of land. As stated by

agricultural expert Vladimir V. Miloserdov, “In the last 20 years, more than 106 million acres of arable land have fallen out of production” (MacFarquhar). Russia’s climate will also face new challenges in the future, such as reduced precipitation that will lead to drought, and an increase in plant disease and pests by 2020 A.D. (Agriculture and Horticulture in Russia).

2. Russian Agriculture

The Russian agricultural business is burdened with challenges. At the beginning of 2010, agricultural organizations owed over 1.5 billion rubles in wages and salaries. The number of people employed in agriculture has also diminished- in the span of 20 years, the amount of workers has dropped by 3 million. Couple this with the loss of 106 million acres of land, and immense disregard is clear. Meanwhile, potential agricultural specialists are unwilling to face the demands and restraints of rural life. They are concerned about lack of up-to-date technologies, the difficult working conditions and low prestige of agricultural work, the lack of social and cultural amenities in Russian villages, and the difficulty of finding a spouse willing to accept rural life (Shirokalova and Deriabina, 2012).

3. Russian Environment

One of the number one reasons why agriculture is so difficult in Russia is because of the disdain Russians show for their environment. During the Soviet era, environmentally threatening incidents such as the bursting of an oil pipeline were almost completely ignored, and government officials felt that the land could easily absorb any level of pollution. Yet this has led to fifty-six areas of Russia being categorized as “environmentally degraded regions”. Public education about climate change and the environment is still very poor, even as ecological disasters mount in the form of greenhouse gas and nuclear emissions, chemical fertilizers, airborne pollutants, and erosion. All of these problems have laid waste to possible agricultural sites (“Environmental issues in Russia”).

4. The Food Import Ban

The Russian government’s self-imposed food import ban in response to the Western sanctions has only made matters worse, in both living standards and the agricultural business. The food ban applies to the United States, European Union, Canada, Australia, and Norway, and includes staples such as beef, pork, fish, dairy products, vegetables, and fruit (Koren). This action has resulted in unneeded, overbearing consequences. Inflation has hit 15%; import-dependent regions are confronting sky-high food prices alongside a lack of local producers; and now even “ordinary” Russians could be spending half of their income on food (Ellyatt). What does this mean for the subsistence Russian family? It means increased corruption as competition for jobs skyrocket, increased malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies, and as a result, increased disease.

Meanwhile, the agribusiness in Russia are receiving more attention from the Russian public as a source of food and expanding their own markets. The food import ban has given Russia a chance to develop its local producers and create sustainable agriculture that will support the entire population. While this is an encouraging outlook, the government is providing minimal support in supplying new land, long-term credit, and infrastructure that will make it easier to get products from farm to table (MacFarquhar).

5. President Vladimir Putin

It is undeniable that Vladimir Putin is popular in Russia, and that Russian national pride is on the rise. However, Putin’s policies may resonate more with the older population; people who feel nostalgia for the Soviet era and see Putin as a father figure. A large majority of Russians also believe the recent referendum in the Crimea was free and fair, and that Kyiv (Kiev) should allow the Crimea to join Russia (“Chapter 3. Russia: Public Backs Putin, Crimea’s Secession”).

Nevertheless, Putin inspires little confidence worldwide, and his actions explain why. Thirteen percent of Russians live in poverty despite a decade of boisterous growth because the neglected income inequality

gap keeps them from rising with the other classes (Gordon). President Putin also chooses to spend the people's money on the extravagance of the Sochi Olympics and the current Crimea annexation (Budjeryn). Putin is spending one-third of Russia's budget on defense and the military, but complaints within the Russian media appear virtually nonexistent. This is because the state controls almost all public news programs (Gordon).

6. The Role of Citizens

As reported by Mariana Budjeryn, "none of this is the West's fault. Nor is today's Russia exclusively Putin's fault. Russian citizens now riding the wave of euphoric national self-aggrandizement and supporting Putin's bloody policies must share the blame. If it is greatness they seek, there is much to do on their own turf."

First of all, Russian citizens can make a big difference by making a variety of small changes in their lifestyle. One important difference is having an outdoor garden in the summer, and an indoor "garden" during the winter. Growing food indoors is not hard at all; the only major problem is providing plants with the appropriate light. By building a factory to produce "grow light bulbs", citizens are not only making it easier to garden indoors, but also opening up another career opportunity in Russia (Vinje). Having a garden outdoors during the summer will help reduce pollution; having an indoor garden during the winter does the same. Finally, both gardens provide the family with extra food year-round.

Another venture responsible citizens could pursue is hosting farmers' markets. This venture makes it easier to spread awareness about local producers and what they have to offer. It also makes it easier for local producers to expand their markets and get their products from farm to table. Nationalism will increase, as Russians take pride in what their country has to offer in food products.

Next, Russian citizens can start caring about their environment. Having gardens and marketing fresh produce is just one way to encourage awareness and activism. Russian citizens can also make pamphlets and pressure newspapers to start addressing environmental problems. They can build environmental services that plant trees, recycle waste, and make sure villages are kept orderly and properly sanitized. All of these activities are ways Russian citizens can care for their country while sustaining fertile land and possibly reducing the chance of lung diseases, such as asthma.

Finally, progressive Russians need to pressure the government, not just the press, and turn the political authorities eyes toward agricultural problems. Russians can accomplish this initiative by writing argumentative papers to government officials and engaging in peaceful protests for pay equality and necessary agricultural assistance. However, as previously stated by the anonymous Russian from the introduction, "Almost every day I see how regular citizens of my country suffer from a lack of rights and from fear of the government and its representatives." How is this fear to be overcome? Compromises are one way to do it. For example, if the citizens throw their full encouragement behind Putin's quest to obtain the Crimea, in exchange, the government will grant farmers more land. In essence, both parties are helping one another to obtain goals by working together. Another way is by the citizens creating a strong underground movement that writes the argumentative papers and does engage in peaceful protests. While this action is definitely risky, it could finally prove to Putin's government that the citizens of Russia are to be taken seriously and that their welfare should come first. Russia does not need a civil war. Hence, any actions towards bringing agricultural problems and citizens' welfare to the forefront of the government's mind should be done with assertion but not aggression, in order for the problem to be seen as a true conflict and not a pitiful plea for attention.

7. The Role of the Government

As stated earlier, Russian citizens are currently looking to their government and President Putin to resolve the issue in the Crimea and make better standards of living in Russia. In resolving the annexation of the

Crimea, there is a democratic process that many Americans are subject to every four years: political campaigns. Let Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich return to his homeland. Withdraw all Russian and Ukrainian troops. Label the Crimea as an independent region. Have President Yanukovich and President Putin campaign for the Crimea for nine weeks. At the end, have the Crimea vote either to remain part of Ukraine or join Russia, and let the transition to Russia be a peaceful one. Measures such as these can be done professionally and peacefully versus with bloodshed and terror. The barrier of the Crimea's nationality, once overcome, will also raise Putin's international status.

Once the issue in the Crimea is resolved, it is clear that Russia still has many issues to amend, which include but are not limited to preserving and improving their environment, raising the income inequality gap, and building a sustainable agriculture foundation. First things first: the Western sanctions and food import ban must be settled. An action of this magnitude will lower food prices and get more food to import-dependent regions. However, this newfound peace and open communication between Russia and the Western nations is not the final solution. President Putin and many Russians have been promoting the food import ban as a way for Russia to build up its own sustainable agriculture and have less dependence on the West. By finally giving attention to the agricultural sector and the ministry of agriculture, the Russian government can hit about six birds with one stone. Improving agriculture will improve the environment. As more plants and livestock are grown, more wildlife will grow as plants and animals circulate through the environment. By allowing research and experiments to be conducted by the Russian Academy of Agricultural Science, All-Russian Institute for Plant Breeding, All-Russian Institute for Physiology, Biochemistry, and Feeding of Agricultural Animals, and other professional organizations, they can improve the prestige of agricultural and rural life while simultaneously preserving the environment by using environment-friendly techniques in their research. By building factories to produce modern agricultural equipment, job opportunities surge. Expanding the size and production of farms will likewise increase employment rates. As food/livestock prices fall, more trade in agricultural products can be pursued, not just within Russia but also with other countries, which will not only help Russia's economy expand, but the global economy will reap benefits, too. Finally, all of these actions and more involvement in agriculture/the environment will increase public health awareness and environmental health awareness in Russia. President Putin's national image will improve immensely as it becomes clear that he is putting the welfare of Russia before the military, and Russian standards of living will boost as people have more food, better health, and more money.

It is useless to think that by just turning its attention back to agriculture, Russia will instantly become a great country with healthy people who live satisfying lives. There are several obstacles both the government and the people of Russia need to overcome. Distrust. Fear of undeserved retaliation against peaceful actions. Debts and the spread of wealth. These problems are glaring in Russia's current situation. These people, separated by social status, wealth, and even common interests, need to learn to communicate. You only learn someone is having a bad day once you talk to them, right? Communicating isn't fancy either. Letters, phone calls, emails, social media, even just talking...the list goes on and on. By reaching out to one another, the people and the government can close their rift and focus on creating an inspirational Russia together.

By focusing on the agricultural sector, the Russian government can better the lives of its citizens, and Russia's people will feel more secure and comfortable in their homeland. Yet communication is absolutely required to solve any conflict. It's time for the thoughtful, committed citizens of Russia to rise up and find a voice. It's common knowledge that people will go with what the majority believes is right; and with the common belief essentially the reconstruction of the agricultural sector, the government will finally open its eyes to the amazing aspirations Russian agriculture can accomplish.

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