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**INFORMED QUESTIONS PAPER: RUSSIAN SOCIAL ISSUES**

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## **INFORMED QUESTIONS PAPER: RUSSIAN SOCIAL ISSUES**

Present-day Russia represents a country still struggling to establish a coherent national and international identity. Domestic problems that were either addressed under the Soviet system, or not even dealt with at all in public view, now represent challenges that the government must face if Russia is to survive at all. These social problems include, but certainly are not limited to, environmental degradation, health care, drug abuse, AIDS, organized crime, juvenile delinquency, and even basic military reform.

### **Environmental issues.**

In 1999, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) declared that Russia's environment painted a "grim picture (Environment News Service, Dec. 10, 1999)." The country represents a major contributor to acid rain and global greenhouse gas emissions. Although Russia passed several new environmental laws early in its post-Soviet Union existence, enforcement has been lax and the environment appears to have steadily lowered as a governmental concern. Russia's participation in such organizations as the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council in Brussels points to an interest by Russia in greater involvement in European affairs. Russia's environmental problems have implications beyond Russia's borders, especially within the European continent as a whole. If Russia is serious about greater participation within European frameworks, why is Russia not taking a more active role in controlling those factors, such as environmental pollution, that impact on health and the quality of life throughout Europe?

Russia eliminated its State Committee for Environmental Protection, the equivalent of the Environmental Protection Agency, in May 2000. According to public statements, the state committee, along with the Federal Forestry Service, was to be absorbed by the Natural Resources

Ministry. This move was announced as a means to increase efficiency by cutting the size of the bureaucracy. According to one report, the function of the Natural Resources Ministry is to exploit resources to the advantage of businesses, without any incentives to protect the environment (World News Interpress Service, May, 29, 2000). What incentives do Russian businesses now have to take environmentally-sensitive measures? What resources can Russia now apply, and what agencies exist to apply them, to better manage environmental quality?

Russia received a \$60 million loan from the World Bank to fund a Sustainable Forestry Pilot Project. This project was to be applied to three representative regions: the Leningrad Oblast in European Russia, the Krasnoyarsk Krai in central Siberia, and the Khabarovsk Krai in the Far East. These three projects represent a combined area of 96.4 million hectares (over 372,000 square miles, greater than the combined size of Texas and Nevada). The Russian government was to provide an additional \$14.5 million in funding, bringing the total size of the project to \$74.5 million. The loan had a running time of 17 years, with a five year grace period (Environment News Service, May 24, 2000). What is the current status of the Sustainable Forestry Pilot Project? How does the Natural Resources Ministry manage the project? How have the funds been applied to date, and how will they be applied over the remainder of the project? What lessons have been learned that have a greater applicability to forest management as a whole? How are these lessons being shared with Russia's neighbors?

### **Health care.**

The life expectancy of Russians, especially Russian men, is decreasing. Some of this stems from unhealthy life habits, but another contributor is the decaying quality of the Russian health care system. Salaries of health care personnel are low, and patients are now required to pay for some testing, clothing and medications during hospital stays. The low average income means

that people must sometimes choose between paying for basic household needs and paying for hospitalization or health care. What steps are being taken to modernize the health care system and increase access to quality health care for all Russians? What public education programs is the government using to encourage its citizens to adopt healthier lifestyle habits?

Hospital modernization is a key component of an effective health care system. According to one source, one in ten Russian hospitals was built before 1914, and one in five hospitals has no running water (New York Times, Dec. 4, 2004). At least 20,000 cancer patients die each year because they cannot afford medicine, and 200,000 diabetics are unable to get insulin, because local and regional governments cannot afford to buy it (New York Times, Dec. 4, 2004). What priorities does the Russian leadership give to health care modernization? What incentives can the Russian government give to those who are interested in health care careers, but are not interested in comparatively lower salaries?

In Russia, seven out of ten pregnancies end in abortion. One out of ten women under the age of 19 has had an abortion, and more than 2,000 teenagers under age 14 have had an abortion (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Feb. 27, 2002). Russia has a policy of paying allowances to new mothers that, in US dollar equivalents, amounts to \$5 per month. This has had no effect on the declining population rate. In what ways does Russia provide contraceptive education to its young women? How can the government provide a comprehensive program that provides basic education and other contraceptive means besides abortion?

### **Drug abuse.**

In January 1998, the Russian ambassador to Colombia, Ednan Agaev, noted a growing alliance between Russian organized crime and Colombian narcotraffickers (Insight on the News, Jan. 12, 1998). He named the Solstsevo Moscow crime organization as being the center of this

arrangement. Cocaine is cited as the drug of choice for abuse. The ambassador portrayed this as “the number one threat now to our national security.” How is the Russian government organizing law enforcement to combat the drug threat? What strategies has the Russian government considered to equip its 20,000 clinics to be of assistance in offering treatment for drug addicts? How can other governments provide assistance to Russia?

Russia has an estimated three million drug addicts who support a drug trade worth \$2 billion each year (Boston Globe, 1999). Annual arrests on drug charges now exceed 250,000. What efforts can the Russian government and Russian society use to reduce the degree of abuse and the number arrested? What information sharing strategies have been considered for participation in bilateral or multilateral partnerships to coordinated efforts to reduce drug abuse?

### **AIDS.**

Russia is now beginning to openly discuss the extensiveness of AIDS infection. In the Volgograd region alone during 2000, there was a seven-fold increase in AIDS infection. The official view is that AIDS infection is a problem associated with drug addiction (Pravda, March 5, 2002). In that same region, over half of registered drug addicts suffer both AIDS and hepatitis, and 80% of those infected are between the ages of 19 and 30. Children’s hospitals report pediatric AIDS infections through blood donated by drug addicts. What steps do hospitals take to screen blood sources for possible transfusion? What programs exist for drug abusers? To what extent are needle exchange programs employed? How has the media been used to encourage public discussion of AIDS infection, AIDS prevention, and AIDS treatment? What treatment programs exist in Russia? How is Russia educating its people of the sexual transmission dynamics of AIDS?

### **Organized crime.**

A World Bank study indicated that up to half of the Russian economy is controlled by organized crime, and that billions of dollars are leaving the Russian economy each year as a result (ENN Emergency Services Report, July 3, 1997). Efforts to bring simultaneous economic and political reform to Russia, called by some as “shock therapy,” contributed to the rise of organized crime and capital flight. A perception by many businesses outside Russia is that Russia represents an unstable investment climate. Until and unless greater economic stability returns to Russia, entrepreneurs and investors that could bring more jobs and prosperity to the Russian economy may seek a better climate elsewhere. How is Russia bringing organized crime under control? What efforts are underway to return capital to Russia that may have previously been laundered?

The Russian Interior Ministry once estimated the size of organized crime in Russia to represent 9,000 criminal organizations employing 100,000 people (USA Today Magazine, May 1999). One author characterized this as an extension of the underground economy that existed during Soviet days, combined with the effects of bureaucratic controls on virtually all facets of life. Even Russian hockey players in the United States are turning to Mafia-like groups to prevent extortion by less-powerful mobs. From that perspective, Russian organized crime is an international dilemma. How does Russia cooperate with the United States government to combat organized crime? What strategies are being considered to reduce the pervasiveness of organized crime and its associated violence?

### **Juvenile Delinquency.**

The United States has several problems of its own regarding juvenile delinquency. Russia is experiencing similar problems. A “Pravda” report cited that juvenile delinquency stems from “parents [who] are almost bandits, when family has no authority, when there are classes in

schools where almost all children's parents are divorced (Pravda, Mar. 7, 2002)." These same children "often say they spit upon Russia." What steps is the Russian government taking to strengthen family units and restore pride and respect to Russian children? What is the Russian government doing to create a post-Soviet civil society? How are social institutions being energized to help create such a society?

President Putin is undertaking a campaign to ensure that Russian children have a happy childhood. A report to President Putin claimed that "the previous Soviet system of values has been destroyed, but no new system has yet been created (Pravda, Mar. 6, 2002). This problem has plagued post-Soviet Russia. Western media influence was cited as one of main influences in cultural decline among Russian youth. Russia is leaning towards a new policy to create programs that will meet the traditional values of the Russian people and Russian civilization. If implemented, the policy will create a culture that "ousts negative heroes and poor topics from mass media (Ibid.)." To what extent will Russian literature be re-introduced to Russian youth to begin this cultural rebuilding? How will the new Russian policy confront possible challenges that it represents media censorship? If President Putin's policy meets resistance, what alternative plans have been considered that will accomplish the same objectives?

President Putin also identified three problems facing Russian youth today: juvenile delinquency, drug addiction and child neglect (Pravda, Mar. 5, 2002). These problems have been created, he said, by "children's loneliness, their lack of supervision even in families, devaluation of cultural values, and deficit of upbringing (Ibid.)." He is considering a new system of education in schools, families and social institutions, which must all be preceded by "a system of cultural values that conform with the nowadays' realities (Ibid.)." What will be the basis of this system of values? What can be learned from practices in Soviet Russia that may have some



applicability today? What policies are being considered to begin family education? What social institutions are seen as the bedrock to this new approach to the young generation?

### **Basic freedoms.**

Russian internet service providers, in the past, were required to provide access to e-mail accounts to the Russian Federal Security Service, if asked (Washington Post, Mar. 7, 2002). Those providers who did not comply faced suspension of their licenses from the Communications Ministry, which effectively meant that they would lose their businesses. Technical regulations passed in the late 1990s allow the government complete access to these accounts without ever needing a court order. These regulations, called the System for Operational Investigative Activities, require Internet providers to provide security offices whatever information and equipment are necessary to tap and monitor Internet systems and their traffic. As Russia continues its transition from a post-Soviet government, citizens require confidence in their government that privacy will not be invaded and personal communications remain personal. What is the intent behind the System for Operational Investigative Activities regulations? How does Russia seek to inspire confidence in its government when the inference can be made that the government does not have confidence in its people? How does this fit in with President Putin's system of cultural values that should impact on all Russian citizens?

Russia recently opened bids for television broadcast rights on the "sixth channel." The government received approximately 15 applications. Press Minister Mikhail Lesin assumed that programming was to be of a public or political nature (Pravda, Mar. 7, 2002). Journalists from the previous licensee of TV-6 have the option of deciding whom they will join in bidding. Why does the Russian government make assumptions about the content of a television broadcast channel? What programming needs are not being fulfilled by current licensees? How do

Russian citizens regard the credibility of their journalists? How well-established is journalistic impartiality in Russian media today? If Russian journalists express a preference for a particular broadcast licensee, how would Russian citizens view these journalists' credibility?

A chronic problem with the Russian military is poor health, bad education and a declining male population (Moscow Times, Feb. 27, 2002). Approximately 14% of current conscripts have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, and 10% have been convicted of various crimes (Moscow Times, Mar. 4, 2002). This indicates that problems within Russian society as a whole are having a direct impact on the Russian military structure. Hazing is becoming commonplace in the Army, leading many recruits to commit suicide (Ibid.). The Russian military leadership states that military reforms are needed but should not be taken too hastily (Moscow Times, Feb. 27, 2002). How has the Russian government looked at the structure of providing basic services to its people in balance with the requirements of its military forces? To what extent does the Russian government see the connection between the construct of a basic society to the efficiency of recruiting, training and maintaining people for its armed forces? How has the government considered re-ordering budget priorities so that the needs of its people can be met and the quality of people entering the armed forces increases? Why is hazing tolerated, and what is the military leadership doing to lessen the impact this has on the readiness of Russian military forces?

### **Conclusion**

Present-day Russia faces many of the same challenges confronting long- and better-established democracies. It is also handicapped through the legacy of its Soviet days and the impact that era has had on the existence of modern Russia. This is not meant to be an indictment of the quality of government services and society within Russia today. Instead, it is an examination of the challenges that Russia confronts as it moves towards modernizing its

populace and the conditions in which they live. If the ensuing dialogue begins that movement, these questions will have been successful.

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