

Russians want decree of economic emergency

by Konstantin George

The heads of both houses of the Russian parliament and other leading figures are demanding the official decree of an economic emergency as the only way to halt the production collapse that has brought the country to the brink of economic chaos. By mid-March, Vladimir Shumeiko, chairman of the Federation Council (upper house), and Ivan Rybkin, chairman of the State Duma (lower house), had agreed to present to both houses in the near future an economic emergency law. Also in March, the Russian Security Council began, finally, to take up the question of the health and demographic catastrophe.

The need for comprehensive emergency measures is urgent. The devastation caused by more than two years of International Monetary Fund shock therapy has created, for the first time ever in the peacetime history of Russia, an absolute decline in its population, caused by the collapse of health and nutrition standards. This was first recorded for 1993, and the trend is accelerating in 1994. Underlying this is the destruction of the physical economy.

Production in free fall

In the first months of 1994, the collapse of production has accelerated to dimensions threatening the very cohesion of the country. February witnessed the single biggest production drop in modern Russian history, and indeed for all Russian peacetime history. Production as a whole fell by 24.3% compared with February 1993. The figures for key sectors, comparing production in January-February 1994 with the same period for 1993, yielded an even more devastating picture. Production was 32% lower in light industry; 21% lower in the food processing industry; and 23% lower in the iron and steel industry, with crude steel production 26% lower. In the chemical, paper, and cellulose industries, the drop was given at 35%, and in the vital machine-building sector, production fell by an incredible 48%.

As the spring planting season arrives, the production of tractors and agricultural machinery for January-February 1994 was 80% less than a year ago. A similar collapse has occurred in the production of vital spare parts. When a tractor breaks down, as they often do, they stay idle indefinitely, with no hope for repair in sight.

Now look at the number of enterprises that have closed down, in full or in part. The statistics do not count the addi-

tional thousands faced with closure in the weeks and months ahead. In October 1993, this figure stood at 2,407 enterprises. By the end of February 1994 (the latest figure available), it had nearly doubled to 4,280. In February 1994 alone, 428 enterprises were forced to close, unable to sell their products. The closures included mammoth production complexes such as the Kirov Tractor Plant in St. Petersburg, and the Volgograd vehicle engine plant.

Shock therapy kills

The breakdown of production and living standards caused by shock therapy has exacted a human toll in the Russian Federation which can be called by no other name than mass murder. Beginning with 1992, "year one" of shock therapy, and escalating ever since, the Russian population has declined in absolute numbers.

Directly caused by the collapse of nutritional and health standards, the death rate is rising and infectious diseases once all but extinct, are assuming epidemic proportions. In 1993, the 2.4 million deaths in the Russian Federation exceeded the number of births by 900,000. The number of births, at about 1.5 million, was about 900,000 lower than in 1992. Due to immigration of ethnic Russians from other republics, the 1993 net decrease in population was lower than 900,000, being at 500,000. Juxtaposed to the collapse in the birth rate, was a new record for abortions, estimated at 4 million last year. Under the conditions of shock therapy, the time a mother would have to devote to caring for an infant, to say nothing of the cost involved, has become a luxury that few can afford. For women, all available time is consumed between the job and the shopping and hustling required each day to ensure that enough food is on the table so that day to day, one survives.

Then there is the mass murder of the elderly and what by western standards would be called those of advanced middle age. In the West, "elderly" conveys the image of perhaps 65 years and up. That was once also the case for Russia. No longer, as the statistics for average life expectancy show, especially for males. In 1987, average male expectancy stood at 65 years. By the end of 1992, this had fallen to 62 years. By the end of 1993, male life expectancy had plummeted to 59 years.

Shock therapy has also destroyed the health system. All sorts of medicines are at best in short supply, and often nonexistent. As a rule, equipment is either lacking or age-old. Medical personnel, at the lower end of state pay scales, and, like so many others, suffering from wage payments often two to three months late, are forced to "moonlight" in order to survive. In Russia, God help you, should you fall critically ill and have no independent means of being taken to the hospital, the ambulance may come hours later, if at all. The reason: Ambulance drivers cannot survive on their official salary; they are forced to double as taxi drivers, while on duty.