

A Call for Action on Russia's Health Crisis

by Suzanne Rose

On May 2, the founders of a new U.S.-Russia Foundation held a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., to inaugurate their efforts. Their press release announced the creation of a tax-exempt organization "to cooperate on the most urgent national security issues facing both nations." The leading issue will be Russia's health crisis. The foundation advocates a reassessment of U.S. policy toward Russia, to recognize this crisis, and a reallocation of resources to alleviate the worsening situation.

The speakers included Prof. Murray Feshbach, Research Professor from Georgetown University; Fritz Ermarth, former chairman of the National Intelligence Council under President George Bush; Bob Swan, president of the new foundation; and Charlotte Baker, its director.

Professor Feshbach first described the horrific health conditions in Russia today, and the demographic consequences, focussing in particular on the AIDS epidemic affecting Russian youth, and the spread of tuberculosis. (For more on Feshbach's work, see "Demographer Warns of Health Catastrophe in Russia," *EIR*, Jan. 2, 1998.)

Feshbach projected a 40 million (one-third) decline of the Russian population by the year 2050, due to disease and drug abuse. The yearly loss of 800,000 or more people has enormous implications for the labor force, including family stability, he said.

The incidence of tuberculosis in Russia has skyrocketed, Feshbach said. He questioned whether the official figures reflect the actual incidence for prisoners, the homeless, forced migrants, and refugees. He thinks that the number of new cases each year is close to 150,000. If current projections hold, the number of Russian deaths attributable to tuberculosis will be greater than the total reported for heart disease and cancer. He estimates that there will be 14 million HIV-AIDS patients in Russia by 2005. The current official number of 25,000 is a vast underestimate; it is more like 200,000, he said. There has been an exponential increase in Moscow of infection rates among 15- to 29-year-olds. Hard drug abuse, prostitution, and diseases such as syphilis are also increasing rapidly; there were 450,000 new cases of syphilis reported last year.

Only 10% of newborn children have no health problems at birth, he reported. Fertility rates are declining to an incredibly low level of only 1.24 children per woman, 40% below the replacement level of 2.1. During the question period, he emphasized that the spread of tuberculosis in Russia could affect the United States. He said that he hoped the next Na-

tional Security Strategy Statement put out by the White House would include recognition of the health crisis in Russia.

Invest in Russian Public Health

Ermarth, former chairman of the National Intelligence Council, stressed that the public health situation in Russia is a strategic concern for the United States. "An investment in Russian public health is an investment in their political and economic development," he said. He warned that Russians believe that the West has been undermining their economy, and opined that the United States could correct that perception with an investment in Russia's public health. Unfortunately, he mislocated the cause of the crisis, as being unbridled spending and corruption, rather than the rabid free-market economic policy which has been imposed on Russia and has led to its deindustrialization.

Bob Swan, the moderator and founder of the new organization, and a Kansas businessman, said that many of his peers view what is happening in Russia today as smashing the hopes that they had during the Cold War, of the promise of Russian development once freed from communism. He called for a "Healthy Russia Initiative" (as opposed to a Strategic Defense Initiative), which he described as a Marshall Plan-like commitment to solve the health crisis. This is impossible under current axioms governing Russia policy, however. "I'm not sure we have someone of the stature of Marshall today," he admitted.

Worse, his analogy to the Marshall Plan was undercut when he proposed that the first initiative be an educational campaign on public health issues, to distribute health education materials, starting with a brochure on heart disease—as if the problem were an ignorant population, rather than lack of economic infrastructure under conditions of economic collapse. This will not change until the straitjacket on Russian economic recovery, imposed by Western insistence on continuing the insane free-trade policies, is lifted.

A member of the audience from Russia pointed out that health problems derive from an economic policy, but the panelists pleaded ignorance on economics. Ermarth proposed that the Russian oil company Lukoil make an investment in public health. However, when the United States had a successful health policy after the war, the initiative came from the government, not the private sector.

According to Feshbach, in some of the Central Asian republics today, life expectancy at birth is higher than in Russia. He said that health problems are even worse in Ukraine than in Russia, in terms of the HIV and TB infection rates per thousand people.

Unfortunately, such initiatives as the formation of this new group, no matter how well-meaning, offer little hope for serious change, because they do not challenge the underlying economic policy assumptions. Only by reorganizing the global financial system—for example, in a New Bretton Woods system—could Russia recover.