

Saratov's Horrible Roads Put Putin on Notice

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"Moscow is not Russia" is a phrase every Russian and Russia-watcher has heard. A simple trip 100 kilometers outside the Garden Ring is enough to convince anyone of this.

I saw the real Russia during a recent trip to the Saratov region. It offers a vivid snapshot of an economically and socially depressed region, although you could take a trip to Kirov, Kemerovo, Kurgan or a dozen other regions and see the same things.

The first thing that caught my eye was the terrible condition of the roads. Even traveling on federal highways was a challenge. The municipal and regional roads are simply falling apart. Some villages with populations of 1,000 or less can be reached only by four-wheel-drive vehicles. In the Petrovsky district, we barely managed to traverse the 3-kilometer stretch of what passed as a road that connects the village of Grachyovka to the outside world. I traveled about 1,500 kilometers of roads in the Saratov region and never once saw any sign of road workers anywhere.

At the same time, 800 meters of embankment along the Volga River was rebuilt at a cost of 800 million rubles (\$25.7 million), or 1 million rubles (\$32,000) per meter. Not only was that reconstruction work unnecessary, but the money could have been better spent on apartments for young families or other serious problems in the region. Unfortunately, local leaders had other priorities.

The Saratov region is effectively bankrupt. With an annual budget of 70 billion rubles (\$2.2 billion), it has accumulated a debt of 36 billion rubles (\$1.2 billion). It is unclear where that money was spent because no significant improvements to the region are evident. Now, every man, woman and child in the region is effectively burdened with more than 14,000 rubles (\$450) of debt.

Agricultural and rural areas are also suffering from neglect. While driving from the rural center of Baltai to the regional capital, Saratov, I saw abandoned tracts of land on both sides of the road that stretched for dozens of kilometers. It was clear that no farming equipment had worked that land for years, and the meter-high pine and birch saplings dotting the fields provided ample proof.

The villages are completely neglected. There is no work, and everyone who could has left to find jobs elsewhere. The locals no longer keep livestock and poultry because they cannot afford the necessary grazing land and feed. There are no streetlights at night, and many villages do not even have a reliable supply of drinking water. The 19 villages in the Bezymensky district exist on an annual budget of only 7 million rubles (\$225,000), too little for anything but the barest subsistence. In the village of Zavetnoye, the village administrator twice collected money from residents to build a fence around the cemetery, but the money later disappeared and no fence was ever built. Even the roof of the local town meeting hall has collapsed, and there is no money to repair it.

The situation in the larger towns and cities is no better. For example, the city of Petrovsk has lost all of its industries — a meat, sewing and brick factories, a milk production facility, four construction companies and two road building firms. Since the local train station closed, there is no longer rail service to Moscow. The Molot factory, the main reason the city was built in the first place, is now bankrupt. Of the 10,000 former employees, only 800 remain, and they have not been paid since April. Several schools and three rural hospitals in the region have been closed. Even the eternal flame at the monument to the unknown soldier does not burn because of lack of funds or simply neglect. To cap it all off, a pub owned by United Russia freely operates on the grounds of a local park for children.

Many of the working-age men of Petrovsk have left for Moscow and other cities to find better jobs. This means that the city, like many other municipalities in the region, is filled predominantly with young single mothers and pensioners.

With the city's industrial base in a state of collapse, the public utilities no longer function properly. I saw a woman hauling two buckets of water home that she had drawn from an outdoor deep-water well pump. She carried them back to her modern apartment building, one among many in the area built for the families of military personnel. Those apartments all have running water, but the quality is so bad that few are brave or foolish enough to drink it.

Many people approached me and complained that it was impossible to enroll their children

in the local kindergartens. Indeed, more than 20,000 children in the region cannot get into kindergartens, including more than 9,000 children in Saratov itself.

Saratov residents are furious about their housing and utilities problems. Private companies have now replaced the government agencies that once managed those services, but they have proved more adept at raising fees than providing services. One ticket collector on a trolleybus in the city of Engels presented me with her utilities bill totaling 800 rubles for one month, although her tiny one-room apartment has little more than a few light bulbs, an old television, a radio and a tea kettle. What's more, her utility bill is 40 percent of her salary of 2,000 rubles per month. The authorities provide virtually no oversight of how the utility companies waste or misappropriate these fees, and city officials regularly ignore the numerous complaints registered by angry citizens. It is as if the local prosecutor's office doesn't even exist.

Regional businesses and farmers are also in bad shape. In April, Moody's downgraded the credit rating of the Saratov region by giving it a negative outlook.

Meanwhile, in the worst Soviet and Orwellian fashion, local authorities blithely report on the progress achieved. The whole town is plastered with posters and billboards promoting United Russia and President Vladimir Putin. One cannot help but notice these signs, especially when it is impossible to travel at a normal speed on the city's bad roads. After numerous meetings and conversations with hundreds of people in the region, I did not encounter a single person who supports United Russia.

Nothing will improve in the Saratov region until new people come to power — professionals who are intent on serving their constituency. Meanwhile, the region continues its free fall toward total collapse. If something isn't done about Saratov and dozens of regions like it, the entire country's collapse will follow.

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