

EUROPE

Russia

How do they survive?

B A R K I

Despite Russia's economic collapse, most ordinary Russians are managing to survive, but not thanks to any help from their government

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“CRISIS, what crisis?” says Boris scornfully, scratching the back of a gigantic pig. Nearby, two teenage daughters are energetically digging manure into the potato patch. Boris's wife, Masha, is at the roadside, selling milk, fresh from their two cows, to passing drivers. Beside her is Piotr, who sells goat's milk and fresh eggs from his two dozen chickens, and a taciturn man offering ragged joints of freshly slaughtered lamb from his flock of 200 sheep.

Viewed from the village of Barki, in the countryside not far from Moscow, the chaos in the Kremlin, not to mention the economy, seems irrelevant. There is plenty to eat, and a fair amount of money too: Russia's richest people have their country houses nearby, and pay well for fresh food.

The villagers of Barki will survive the winter without difficulty. Even elsewhere, grim though this winter will be, most Russians expect to get through it just as they survived previous ones—on their own initiative, with their own food (see table). Few are paid much money; but few seem to starve either. They get by, just, on home-grown potatoes or hand-picked wild mushrooms, kasha (crushed grain) still cheaply available in shops, plus bits and pieces from their employer if they are lucky.

Not many expect the state to help. The government does have 20m tonnes of grain stockpiled. Even with this year's bad harvest, this ought to be enough to keep the country in bread and porridge—if, that is, the distribution system works. All the same, after Russia's economic collapse, this winter could be particularly bad. Murray Feshbach, a demographer at Georgetown University in Washington who monitors Russia's appalling health, says malnutrition is spreading. On September 30th the International Committee of the Red Cross launched a

\$15m appeal for the 1.4m neediest Russians, such as big families and pensioners, in the 12 regions worst battered by the economic troubles. Its Moscow office now talks of the menace of “mass starvation” if things get worse.

In Noginsk, for example, a depressed and depressing textile town an hour’s drive east of Moscow, pensioners tend not to have their own garden plots, and therefore no independent source of food. “I’m a city person,” explains one. Her pension, of 400 roubles a month, used to be worth about \$60; after the devaluation in August

How Russians survive	
<i>Are you being paid at your place of work?</i>	
Yes, regularly	18
Yes, irregularly	25
No	57
<i>What will enable you to live through the economic crisis?</i>	
Food from own small-holding or dacha plot	44
Stockpiled food from the summer	12
Game-shooting, fishing, picking berries, mushrooms etc	12
Food bought at cheap outdoor markets	10
Informal self-employment	10
Help from relatives in the countryside	9
Bank savings	5
<i>On whom are you relying to get through the crisis?</i>	
Myself	61
Family, neighbours and friends	14
The state	12
<i>Would you like to emigrate if the situation got worse?</i>	
Yes	18
No	62
Hard to say	20
<i>If so, where to?</i>	
United States	28
Israel	22
Middle East	17
Western Europe	17
Central Europe	11
Other countries in former Soviet Union*	6
*Excluding Baltic states	
Source: ISM Research Centre, 3,340 respondents across Russia	

it is worth half that. In any event, it has not been paid for two months. Her son, the

only person who might help her, lives in Kamchatka, in Russia’s remotest far east.

He has not been paid for five months.

The town's economy is rotting. As the local textile factory went on shedding jobs in recent years, many workers became traders, shuttling cheap toys, shoes or make-up from Turkey or Poland, and selling them in Russia's big outdoor markets. It was arduous, chancy work, but it fed the family. Now that has stopped. The implosion of the banking system has wiped out their money.

Trouble has spread even to places considered a model of how to adapt to new ways. Not far from Noginsk, Chernogolovka is one of Russia's brainiest towns. Once a pampered research centre, the town has done all the right things. Its laboratories, some of them world-class, have contracts with companies such as Siemens of Germany and NEC of Japan. Nearly one in five of its 22,500 residents has an e-mail address. It has a new vodka factory, run by retired army officers. The town was thriving until the economic collapse, which has thrown budgets into chaos, and made it impossible for scientists, or distillers, to set prices for future contracts. "The government has changed the rules, without telling us the new ones," says one scientist. "If this carries on, hundreds of our best people will simply emigrate."

Russians may be fed up, but will they revolt? Opinion polls suggest that about a quarter of the population would take part in mass protests; about a half think such events are likely this winter. The first test will come on October 7th, when unions and the Communist Party have called a national strike, designed to oust President Boris Yeltsin, rather than the government of Yevgeny Primakov, the prime minister.

A strike, a demonstration—or even, when tempers fray, a riot—in Noginsk, and towns like it, might prod the government into doing something. It has begun to pay wage arrears, albeit in ever feeble roubles. But what ordinary Russians need as much as anything is a secure and stable place to live and work. The diligent smallholders of Barki, for example, who trade by the road, dare not sell their produce at markets for fear of the mafia. And getting rid of the mafia, these days, is still a pipe-dream.