

Not by bread alone: Russians urged to go without for Putin

AFP, Moscow

Eat less, use beetroot instead of lipstick, swap French lingerie for Russian-made cotton panties and remember that hardships are a test from God.

These and other tips are being offered to Russians by lawmakers, top policy makers and the Russian Orthodox Church as the gravity of the economic crisis sinks in and prices soar.

The country pulled through great hardships before, officials say, and people should tighten their belts for their leader Vladimir Putin and a great Russia amid the confrontation with the West over Ukraine.

"I lived both under Gorbachev and Yeltsin but Putin is the first president for whom I am being asked to eat less," one Russian, Andrey Kozenko, said on Twitter.

His quip would be funny if it were not sad.

Government members openly admit they lack a plan to tackle the crisis brought on by falling oil prices and Western sanctions and warn it may last for years.

From affluent Moscow to the far-flung regions, Russians are feeling the pain: with some foregoing foreign travel while others pinch pennies to buy food.

Last week lawmaker Ilya Gaffner was monitoring price hikes at a grocery store in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg when an elderly woman told him she could no longer afford sugar for her disabled son.

His advice to her? Eat less.

"If there is not enough money you have to remember that we are Russians, we survived hunger and cold, we have to think about our health and eat less," said the deputy in the Sverdlovsk region legislative chamber, who sports a double chin.

His remarks caused outrage -- and a barrage of unprintable online comments -- forcing a senior ruling party lawmaker to recommend that Gaffner think twice before speaking next time.

The deputy had no sooner apologised for his faux pas than a top Putin ally told the world Russians indeed were ready for sacrifices, especially when their leader was under pressure.

"We will withstand all hardships in this country, eat less food, use less electricity," First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov told Davos elites at the World Economic Forum.

"If a Russian feels external pressure, he will never give his leader up," said Shuvalov, who is believed to be one of the wealthiest government officials.



A man sets a candle near placard reading "World wake up. Stop Putin's terrorism", on Independence Square in Kiev yesterday during a rally for people who died as a result of shelling in the southern Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

Patriarch Kirill also called for modesty as he addressed millions on January 7 when Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas.

"During crisis we overcome evil," the powerful head of the Russian Orthodox Church said in televised remarks. He added that those who are thinking of starting a family should not put their plans on hold due to the crisis because Russians were never rich.

"This prosperity brought on by the froth of petrodollars, it really came just recently."

A senator from the parliament's upper house also chimed in, suggesting that women can use natural colours from vegetables to paint their faces like their foremothers did in ancient times.

"If they must use makeup on their lips -- no problem there is beet, it's natural and chemicals would not enter the body," Igor Chernyshev, deputy head of the social policies committee, said in December. "And our women look better in lingerie made at a Moscow factory than that made in France."

Online newspaper Gazeta.ru said officials made it increasingly clear to ordinary Russians that the crisis was a shared responsibility.

"The question is, are those who yesterday enthusiastically supported the takeover of Crimea ready to pay for it with a sharp decline

in living standards?"

Whether they are ready or not, Russians now spend more on food after inflation reached double digits and the ruble lost half its value against the dollar.

According to pollsters Synovate Comcon, 55 percent of residents of cities with a population of over 1 million saved on food for their New Year's table, up 12 percentage points compared to the first quarter of 2009 when Russians struggled with the effects of the global financial crisis.

Many say they don't mind making sacrifices.

"Figuratively speaking, I am ready to use beet instead of makeup for my lips," said Tatyana Khrolenko, 75.

"We must help Donetsk and Lugansk," she said, referring to east Ukrainian rebel strongholds battling Ukrainian forces. Putin remains Russia's most popular politician.

When he banned EU and US food imports in retaliation for Western sanctions in August, many reacted with bravado, saying they would get by without French cheese or Spanish ham.

But as the crisis deepens, anger grows.

"I absolutely don't trust our corrupt authorities," said Yulia Galich, 43. "And since there's no trust, there's no desire to endure this. For whom? For Putin or Shuvalov?"

India to open coal to commercial mining firms soon

REUTERS, Davos, Switzerland

India expects to hold auctions for private firms to mine and sell coal in the near future, the country's coal and power minister Piyush Goyal said but first wants to deal with mines that are directly linked to plants that use the fuel.

To boost output and cut imports, Prime Minister Narendra Modi passed an executive decree in December to open up India's nationalised coal industry. Bids have been invited from firms that use coal for their own power, steel or cement plants.

"Once my actual user requirements are broadly met, I'm hoping to start opening up to private miners," Goyal told Reuters on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

"I've not applied my mind entirely to it, but I don't know whether the entire process for all the actual users could be done within this year. But somewhere in the near future I do see that happening."

Indian conglomerates such as the Adani Group, controlled by billionaire Gautam Adani, and GVK are likely to bid for commercial coal blocks to cash in on fast-rising demand from the power industry.

Goyal also said the decks were clear for a 10 percent sale of the government's stake in Coal India Ltd.

"If the timing is right and it is in the interests of the government and the people of India that it should be this year, we'll do it," Goyal said at the "Make in India" lounge set up to attract investment to Asia's third largest economy.

Workers in Europe's oil hub hope for the best

AFP, Aberdeen, United Kingdom

On the docks in Aberdeen, oil workers put a brave face on hundreds of job cuts linked to sinking crude prices while union leaders warn that the worst is yet to come.

"It has happened before and it will happen again. There will probably be job losses but that's the way the industry works," said Tony Maguire, a rig worker.

But for Jake Molloy, a regional organiser for the RMT union in Aberdeen, Europe's oil capital in northeast Scotland, workers who lose their jobs face "a lifetime crisis".

Molloy was one of 20,000 people who lost jobs in a downturn in 1986 and said the decline is more dangerous now because North Sea offshore fields are depleting.

"I hope this is just a blip... but I am more concerned now than I was (then)," he told AFP in an interview in the city, which has been built on oil revenues.

Oil prices are currently hovering at around \$50 per barrel for Brent crude, the European benchmark, representing a decrease of 60 percent since June when prices were at \$115 a barrel.

Oil majors have been quick to react: BP, Shell, Conoco Phillips all announced cuts in the last six months.

More than half of all jobs in Aberdeen are linked to oil, yet at a time when the industry might be facing the biggest crisis in its history, the atmosphere in the Scottish hub has remained strangely calm.

In the port of Aberdeen, where dockers are busy loading equipment for a rig onto massive vessels, workers were trying to stay optimistic.

Robert, who has worked on the dock for 29 years and whose son is doing an apprenticeship in the sector, dismissed the latest fall in prices as "a few blips".

Residents still complain about traffic jams -- seen as a positive sign reflecting the city's commercial buzz and the failure of road infrastructure to keep up.

"If things were really bad the big building outside the airport would stop progressing," said Dave, a taxi driver, referring to a luxurious office complex being prepared for Norwegian oil services firm Aker Solutions.

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ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড

(পেট্রোবাংলাৰ একটি কোম্পানী)

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