

## Privatization Didn't Kill

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By Konstantin Sonin

If journalists would only wait a year or two before printing news of the latest scientific breakthrough or refutation of an accepted theory, it would make life much easier for scientists and academics. Of course, that would complicate matters for the media.

But a problem arises because of this practice. Any article published in an academic journal justifiably enjoys a certain degree of credibility. The very fact of its having been published means that several specialists working in the same field gave it a favorable evaluation. The editor of a reputable journal typically relies on two to three such positive reviews before choosing to publish an article, with leading international journals publishing only a few dozen articles of the more than 1,000 that they receive yearly. And yet even that is no guarantee that the conclusions expressed in the selected articles are correct.

The published material is more often an invitation to scholarly debate than a definitive answer or solution. If the results are questionable and the methods inadequate — or worse, if the data is manipulated — it will eventually become known. But by then, the public will have probably lost interest in the subject. You would not expect a newspaper article to say: “Do you remember all the excitement over that? It turns out all that hoopla was for nothing.”

Exactly one year ago, one of the world's most authoritative medical journals, *The Lancet*, published an article by Oxford sociologist David Stuckler and his colleagues. Their analysis of data from 25 transition economies showed that Russia's mass privatization program was a determining factor in the increased mortality rate in Russian men. It is true that Russia conducted mass privatization and that the expected life spans for Russian men declined sharply in the 1990s. Stuckler's main contribution was to establish a cause-and-effect relationship based on the rise in unemployment caused by privatization. This confirmed the darkest suspicions of the opponents to market reforms — that “privatization kills!” It is therefore not surprising that such leading publications as *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist* immediately ran stories with the results of the study by the Oxford sociologists.

It is interesting to ask: Which of those publications will cover the rebuttal to those findings published this January in *The Lancet*? Scott Gehlbach, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, and John S. Earle, a senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Michigan and one of the world's leading specialists in analyzing data from businesses in transitional economies, tried to duplicate Stuckler's findings, this time using more accurate statistical methods and more “individualized” data. Their piece, which underwent even stricter review prior to publication than the original article by Stuckler, states that privatization did not exert any significant influence on the increase of mortality in Russian men.

Oh, what a difference a year makes.

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