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Gogol's Take on Skolkovo

By Alexei Bayer

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A well-known writer in Russia is never a mere celebrity, a storyteller or a best-selling wordsmith. He — and sometimes even she — is a moral compass, a political force and even a prophet. Russian officials fear books and their influence and endlessly try to buy off or banish literary figures. Stalin referred to writers as "engineers of the human soul."

Even today, Russian writers retain some of their prophetic mantle — probably because Russian society has changed so little at its core, despite all of its momentous upheavals. Descriptions of 19th-century Russia by social critics and satirists such as Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Goncharov and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin remain surprisingly fresh. The name of a New York-based gypsy punk group — "Gogol Bordello" — aptly describes Russia in the post-Soviet era.

Take Gogol's classic, "The Dead Souls." The rural serf-holding Russia it portrays no longer exists, but its characters are readily recognizable. Landowner Manilov, for instance, is an inventor of grand but useless schemes who dreams of modernizing his property and building a tunnel under his manor house. Meanwhile, he neglects his estate, which has fallen into ruin.

Drunkenness, laziness and theft flourish among his serfs and servants.

Literary scholar Dmitry Likhachyov once suggested that Manilov is a veiled caricature of Tsar Nicholas I, but Gogol's descriptions fit today's Russian leader surprisingly well, especially in relation to President Dmitry Medvedev's current obsession: the government-funded project to build a Russian Silicon Valley in Skolkovo, just outside Moscow.

With this in mind, Medvedev recently traveled to California to see the real thing, visiting the offices of Apple, Twitter and other global high-tech brands. He put these companies on notice that Russia will soon give them a run for their money. The idea is that Russian mathematical geniuses, computer geeks and other techies who currently man workstations and executive offices in Silicon Valley would do the same in their own country, thanks to the care and support of their government.

Since Medvedev's return, Skolkovo has become a national priority, overshadowing preparations for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Meanwhile, Russian bloggers have already showed their wit by inserting a soft sign into the world Skolkovo (Скольково), making it sound like Сколько? (How much?). In other words, the real question is how much money will be stolen by bureaucrats before the project gets off the ground.

In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama visited Russia and was treated to a beluga caviar breakfast and other pompous meals. To reciprocate, he took Medvedev to a greasy spoon in Arlington, Virginia.

I don't know what Obama thought of Medvedev's Manilov-like plans for Skolkovo, but I suspect that the U.S. president, who got his start as a community organizer in innercity Chicago, probably would have advised him to start Russia's technological breakthrough with small practical steps — for instance, buying computers for schools and hiring more math teachers.

While less ambitious, it would have been more useful. Silicon Valleys grow from the bottom up and are not imposed by a Kremlin fiat.

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