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Saving Russia With a Great Flood

By Alexei Pankin

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During the couple of years leading up to the Soviet collapse, a friend of mine from Rostov-on-Don who firmly believes in the virtues of capitalism kept saying to me that the only way to save the country would be to wipe out Moscow with a flood. His reasoning: The conflicting messages issued from the nation's capital by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, then-president of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union, were enough to drive away not only the other republics, but also dozens of Russia's own regions.

The hoped-for flood never materialized, and the country collapsed as feared. Now it seems that a similar rift has developed between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. But this conflict doesn't threaten to tear the country apart because nobody is paying attention to it anyway.

I came to this conclusion while attending the Days of Innovation conference last week in Chelyabinsk. That event was timed to coincide with the signing of a long-term agreement between the U.S. company Emerson, a developer of automatic control systems; South Urals State University; and the Chelyabinsk regional administration.

Engineers at a Chelyabinsk defense factory created the privately held Metran company back in 1992 and began producing test equipment for pipelines. In 2009, Emerson bought the successful high-tech company and transformed it into one of the best engineering and production centers in the world, providing equipment directly to Russian buyers who had previously relied on imports.

The university contributes to this collaboration by training skilled personnel and conducting research. The regional administration supports the arrangement because it creates jobs and increases tax revenues.

Of course, it becomes possible to believe that Russia's drive to modernize might succeed when you see the new production lines at the factory with your own eyes, as well as the ultra-modern laboratory at the university, one of Eastern Europe's most powerful supercomputers — running almost noiselessly, thanks to a liquid coolant created on site — and students who know that interesting careers await them.

I was discussing this with fellow journalists over dinner that evening when we unexpectedly got word that Medvedev, citing serious disagreements with Putin, had all but decided to run against the prime minister for re-election. All thoughts of modernization were forgotten as we scrambled to consult the Internet about the latest political development.

The Internet is always filled with stories and comments about friction within the ruling tandem, so this was nothing new. Despite the fact that all the Moscow journalists present were totally preoccupied with the 2012 question, not a single one of the dozens of local government officials, businesspeople, engineers, professors and students whom we met over the next two days at the conference even bothered to ask their distinguished Moscow guests about the unfolding political collision.

That fact alone gave me faith that a great future awaits Russia. I am particularly relieved these days that no one wants to flood Moscow anymore.

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