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Putin's Wabi Sabi

By Richard Lourie

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Neutrinos made headlines recently for having apparently traveled faster than the speed of light during an experiment at the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Switzerland. Possessing neither charge nor mass, neutrinos are "able to sail through walls and planets like wind through a screen door," as The New York Times poetically put it.

But this seeming violation of the speed of light is not just a cosmic curiosity like the discovery of an Earth-like planet in a distant galaxy. It will mean, as one scientist put it, "We don't know anything about anything."

What scientists cannot abide is a universe whose laws are not 100 percent perfect and immutable. The very idea that, say, even just once in a billion years, the speed of light could be violated for a nanosecond drives them to distraction.

But to the Japanese philosophical school known as Wabi Sabi, nothing could be more indicative of the universe as it actually is. In this view, the universe is imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. Works of art should always contain an imperfection to reflect that reality.

Nothing, of course, could be easier than getting stuck in a point of view. With that in mind, I decided to examine my own thinking about Russia to see whether I had fallen into the trap of creating too perfect a picture.

My view of particular events in Russia is filtered through my general vision of the country that, succinctly put, runs as follows: Russia collapsed in 1917 and again in 1991, and it will collapse again for the third and final time in the mid-21st century. It will collapse for three main reasons:

1. It will fail to create an identity for itself composed of new goals and fresh symbols.
2. It will not diversify the economy before its gas and oil resources are exhausted or supplanted by new forms of energy.
3. It will not introduce the political reforms that would allow the citizenry to feel that they are stakeholders in society.

Russia will fragment, Siberia will secede, the Far East will be taken by China, and the Muslim south will break away. Only the heartland will be left, a dwarf-star state.

Or maybe not. Contrary information and opinions have been trickling in. In an interview in this newspaper, Texan entrepreneur Christopher Van Riet — who has been successful in Russia — was quoted as saying: "I think Putin is a great leader. He has brought rule of law to Russia, and that has unlocked great wealth for the population."

A rare sentiment! Or is it?

Russia seems suddenly to be waking up to its natural ability as a knowledge economy. Partnering with Intel, Google and Microsoft, the Russian education system is making serious investments in digital technology for its schools.

I ask myself, "What if Putin realizes that his upcoming six-year term will be his best chance to change the course of Russian history and be remembered as a major figure?" What if he pours money into education and infrastructure and somehow stimulates that renaissance everyone expected with the fall of the Soviet Union but which never occurred?

But then a little voice tells me that the scientists at the European Organization for Nuclear Research simply mismeasured, that Wabi Sabi is just a fancy way of saying that the exception proves the rule, and Putin & Co. will never do enough to save Russia from its next and, no doubt, final collapse.

Still, that little voice does not sound quite as sure of itself as before.

Richard Lourie is author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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