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The Pesky Stagnation Problem

By Alexei Bayer

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Many jaws dropped when Dmitry Peskov declared that the Brezhnev years of stagnation had been a time of great achievement for Russia. But, of course, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's press secretary does not really believe that, as he put it, "Brezhnev was a huge plus for Russia."

Peskov was just 15 when Brezhnev died, and he did not experience that era at first hand. But he is smart enough to know that to discuss Brezhnev's achievements in such terms is laughable.

It is his job to put a positive spin on the neo-Brezhnevite stagnation that Russia will enter with his boss' return to the presidency in 2012. Putin's thuggish energy, unnatural boyishness and reportedly Botox-enhanced youthful face are starting to make ordinary Russians every bit as nauseated as Brezhnev's doddering old age. It is not Peskov's statement that is disheartening, but the new stagnation.

Russia has always had enormous wealth. It could rely on its huge territory, rich natural

resources and numerous, highly patriotic and talented people. After World War II, the country also built up a massive nuclear arsenal rivaling that of the United States. But instead of creating prosperity and happiness for its people, the wealth and security provided a margin for error for its rulers, allowing them to behave with breathtaking stupidity.

Just look at the past 100 years. Tsar Nicholas II began a war against Germany and Austria, although the country was completely unprepared. But he was saved by Russia's vast territory and millions of peasants hastily mobilized and thrown into the trenches as cannon fodder. Nicholas did lose his throne, but not because of a military defeat.

Then the Bolsheviks mounted their hare-brained Communist experiment, destroying the economy and killing, imprisoning and sending into exile millions of educated, capable people. Josef Stalin drowned the country in blood and destroyed its moral core. On top of that, he eliminated every experienced commander within his own military and was so busy murdering his best officers that he totally missed the start of Adolf Hitler's invasion. Still, Russia survived despite losing huge chunks of territory and taking grotesque casualties in the first six months of war.

Brezhnev had the luxury of doing nothing for 18 years and allowing the country to rot. Still, there were no immediate repercussions. The Soviet Union endured almost another decade after Brezhnev's death, finally crumbling under the weight of its own uselessness.

Russia's wealth is immense but not infinite. Lately, the margin for error that Russian rulers enjoy has started to tighten. The Communist empire and colonial possessions are gone, and Russia's influence among its former satellites extends only to economic and political basket cases. The once-boundless human resources have been decimated. Russia's population is less than half of what it would have been had the calamities of the past century been avoided. Ethnic Russians are dying out, and many educated and enterprising citizens have emigrated. Even the territory is shrinking, as eastern Siberia is being effectively colonized by Chinese migrants. At the start of the Brezhnev era, the Soviet Union was a technological rival of the West. Today, it is a hopeless laggard. Its manufacturing is backward, production is woeful and business climate is one of the worst in the world. Meanwhile, China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey and other countries are pulling ahead. The world is becoming more competitive, and the struggle for resources, brainpower and technology is intensifying.

For all of Peskov's propaganda trickery, Russia cannot afford another month of neo-Brezhnevite stagnation, let alone a six-year term.

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