

The Miracle-Industrial Complex

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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Leaders are upset over the growing scientific and technical gap between Russia and the West. It's not the scarcity of high-technology products coming out of Russia that alarms them. What worries President-elect Vladimir Putin and his inner circle is that the technological revolution sweeping the world could devalue their most important legacy from the Soviet era — its nuclear arsenal.

But unlike the Soviet Politburo, today's leaders cannot keep the subservient population in a state of poverty for the sake of maintaining nuclear parity with the United States or outdo it with "miracle weapons." To this day, many military and political leaders hope that a Russian Einstein would somehow emerge out of nowhere who could enable the country to leapfrog over its rivals in a single bound.

Now the authorities are rushing to create yet another agency whose chief mission will be to produce these miracles. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin announced on Friday that Putin would establish a foundation for advanced research. "A Russian version of DARPA will soon be created," Rogozin said, referring to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency under the U.S. Defense Department. Russian leaders have begun to envision the agency as

something of a magic wand they can wave to solve all their problems.

"The idea is to create something of a research predator that would hunt among university research centers to identify the most promising, groundbreaking and innovative proposals with potential defense applications," Rogozin explained.

In reality, only a true miracle could help Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov fulfill his promise to develop a program for creating beam, geophysical, wave, genetic and psychophysical weapons by the end of this year. According to Serdyukov, the plan to fully modernize the military by 2020 includes the introduction of weapons based on these new principles.

It is interesting that Serdyukov made his comments during a meeting to discuss the security and defense objectives Putin set forth in a Feb. 20 Rossiiskaya Gazeta article. Putin wrote: "The military capability of a country in space ... will play a great, if not decisive, role in determining the nature of an armed conflict. In the more distant future, weapons systems based on new principles (beam, geophysical, wave, genetic, psychophysical and other technologies) will be developed. All this will, in addition to nuclear weapons, provide entirely new instruments for achieving political and strategic goals. Such high-tech weapons systems will be comparable to nuclear weapons but will be more 'acceptable' in terms of political and military ideology. In this sense, the strategic balance of nuclear forces will play a gradually diminishing role in deterring aggression."

I did not attach much importance to that passage when it was first released. After all, it is natural when politicians make ridiculous claims and promises in election campaigns. But now, it seems that Russia is ready to put its money where its mouth is. This pre-election absurdity has become a powerful magnet for attracting state funds. What's more, Rossiiskaya Gazeta recently published an article on top-secret Soviet-era laboratories, one of which allegedly created a field generator that could purify even the most contaminated water or make perfectly good water unfit for human consumption.

Of course, a Russian version of DARPA would only be effective if it employed independent specialists who were able to distinguish between groundbreaking theories and useless pseudo-science. Given the complete lack of objective criteria for evaluating the soundness of scientific work done in Russia, finding such experts would be next to impossible. The new agency will almost certainly be staffed by servile bureaucrats rather than competent, independent-minded researchers. Thus, Rogozin's new agency will doubtless produce dozens of new eccentrics like Viktor Petrik, who will claim to have invented a perpetual motion or time machine.

Not long ago, Defense Ministry chiefs proudly announced that they had discontinued funding for useless scientific research that had been conducted for decades without producing any results. Yet Serdyukov, in blind obedience to Putin, is doing precisely the opposite, allocating billions of rubles to pointless research and development projects.

This is not to say that the leading Russian scientists who have remained in the country are not qualified. The issue is the pitiful, neglected condition of basic sciences in the country during the past 25 years. A dismal lack of funding led to the breakdown of academic research institutions and the flight of the country's top scientists. Under these conditions, expecting

a technological breakthrough is completely unrealistic.

To create a new super weapon, Russia's entire military-industrial complex needs to be revamped. Unfortunately, there is no sign that such a restructuring is taking place. In fact, First Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Sukhorukov recently announced that state defense orders would be cut 25 billion rubles (\$849 million) due to the defense industry's inability to fulfill past orders. The Russian defense industry is currently incapable of mass producing even Soviet-era weapons systems.

Restoring the country's scientific prowess also requires fundamental improvements to its education system. Russia's brightest students who excel in math and sciences need a financial and career incentive to work as scientists and not state officials. Simply releasing young scientists from obligatory military duty is not enough. There is an obvious need to make deep and fundamental reforms to the military-industrial complex. Of course, any earnest reform in education or the defense industry will eventually run up against Putin's unyielding power vertical. And that is why senior officials would rather create yet another government agency to "produce miracles" than undertake the thankless job of making improvements to a system that does not welcome them.

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