

Building a Virtual Skolkovo

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When President Dmitry Medvedev in 2009 announced plans to build an innovation center at Skolkovo, many hoped the idea would not last. Right from the start, the scientific community was horrified by the project. In a country that already has major scientific centers in dire need of support and funding, millions of dollars were thrown into building a new one from scratch.

Instead of setting specific objectives or priorities, Skolkovo was charged with the impossibly broad task of fostering innovation in general. Huge sums were allocated for abstract goals — in other words, for absolutely nothing. Worse still, those funds were taken from the budgets of already-functioning research institutions, even if the money ostensibly came through other channels.

The scientific community has held the dim hope that the flow of petrodollars would eventually reach the older, more neglected institutions engaged in scientific research. To be fair, though, these facilities have been receiving better equipment in recent years, and many scientists now earn salaries that they can speak of without feeling ashamed. But the main

problems remain unresolved. The government's science policy lacks a strategic focus on key areas; there is no longer a direct connection between real-world problems and research; and the link between research and manufacturing has broken down.

At the moment when it seemed as if these questions were at least on the agenda, Skolkovo resurfaced, only this time not as an overpriced, high-tech pipe dream but as a lavishly complex transportation hub. Now Skolkovo is set to get a new railroad line and highway. All of that transportation infrastructure will lead nowhere.

An amazing 85 billion rubles (\$2.8 billion) has been allocated for the project from the federal budget. Businesses are supposedly expected to supply the rest, but in reality, state-owned companies are being forced to create innovation funds or to make contributions to the project.

Russia is desperately short of good roads. It is easier and sometimes faster to fly to Turkey than to travel across Moscow. What's more, airports in many major Russian cities have been closed, and the transportation problems in Moscow have become unbearable. Amid all this, the government is allocating enormous funds to build a transportation hub at Skolkovo. The real reason for this is that Skolkovo has been chosen as the site of the Group of Eight summit in 2014.

The recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vladivostok proved that international conferences cost significantly more in Russia than in other countries. But at least the outlays for that summit could be justified by the need to develop the Far East region. Whether this will actually happen is another issue entirely. But what could be the reason for developing the area around Skolkovo? The whole idea of innovation has been largely forgotten in the rush to construct new buildings on a scale rivaling that of the Egyptian pyramids.

The great flow of petrodollars is being used to indulge the vanity of the country's leaders. After all, in their eyes, Russia's success boils down to being able to show off to their foreign counterparts against the backdrop of flashy, high-tech "innovation parks." Perhaps that is enough in this age of Twitter and Facebook — at least for those who live in the virtual world.

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