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A Long Haul From Snail Mail to Skolkovo

By Mark Nuckols

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Not very long ago, when I was in Lithuania on a visit, I mailed a letter to my bank in London. The rate for standard airmail from Vilnius to London was the equivalent of $1, and according to the bank, my letter arrived four days later.

More recently, I mailed a similar letter to the same British bank from Moscow. The rate for "express airmail" was the equivalent of $4. The smiling clerk at Russian Post assured me that my letter would be delivered within two weeks and gave me a tracking number so that I could track my letter's progress on their website.

Two weeks went by, and I decided to track my letter's whereabouts. According to the Russian Post website, my letter had been "received by the international department for overseas delivery" two days after I sent it. But it seemingly had made no further progress out of Moscow.

After another two weeks, I went back to my local post office and asked the same friendly clerk if there was any way to determine where my letter was and when it might make it to its

destination.

"The tracking number on your receipt only tracks your letter as far as the international department, and then they change the number," she said.

When I asked her about the new number, she said, "I have no idea," as if I had asked a ridiculous question. At that point, I had been waiting a month, and there was still no sign that my letter had made it anywhere near Britain.

I know that things in Russia don't always work as well as they do in the West, but when I tell Russians this story, their reactions reveal more about Russia than the underlying tale.

The first reaction was "What did you expect?" It seems that people in Moscow consider it an outrageous idea that Russian Post should be any better than Ottoman Post in the mid-19th century.

And then there is the nanotechnology brigade. Their argument was: "Russia doesn't need to master all this old antiquated stuff like mail delivery. In 10 years, Russia will be a hypermodern society with a super high-tech economy." This sounds to me like a grade school student explaining his failing grade in algebra by telling his parents he's going to be a professor of quantum physics when he grows up, so why bother with fourth-grade mathematics.

Yes, people rely less on old-fashioned mail service as the Internet becomes the preferred means for transmitting communications. But sometimes you just have to send a plain paper document. In this case, the bank required a document with an original signature.

Russia's ridiculously inefficient, unreliable and slow mail service needlessly makes commerce and plain living more expensive when people have to rely on FedEx or DHL just to mail a simple letter. I believe it also reflects poorly on Russia. I do not see why investors, for example, should have great confidence in Skolkovo's high technology project if they can't mail a postcard back to Silicon Valley that will arrive within at least a few weeks.

Mail delivery is a basic primary service that most governments perform almost as an afterthought. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev two weeks ago expressed his own criticism of Russian Post, saying that it was time to modernize the system and "hold it to the standards found in the rest of the world."

I could not agree more. Oh, and after six weeks, my letter finally did arrive in Britain.

Mark Nuckols is a professor of law and business at Moscow State University and at the Russian Academy of National Economy.

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