The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Medvedev Taking Russia Down a Road to Hell

By Boris Kagarlitsky

February 27, 2013



There is no harm in dreaming about something — unless the dreamer has access to billions of rubles of public money and has no qualms about using it.

In Nikolai Gogol's book "Dead Souls," the landowner Manilov seems relatively harmless because his dream to build a useless bridge over a river remains only an idle fancy. However, if he had brought financial ruin on the nearby villages to realize his dream, readers would have felt far less charitably toward him.

Russia's Manilov-like government officials are dangerous for their eagerness to satisfy any personal whim at the public's expense. No manner of argument or appeal to common sense and the rules of math and geography can dissuade them from their purpose. If a professional organization or public opinion begins opposing their plans, they simply use budgetary funds to hire their own expert who, for a fee, will happily prove or justify absolutely anything: that the Earth is square, for example, or that the Skolkovo technology park is a worthwhile and effective project.

Unfortunately, it turns out that Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev is a very ambitious dreamer. He firmly believes that the ambitiousness and enormity of a project guarantee its success. The idea that the project should also be economically sound and capable of accomplishing at least some meaningful purpose is a notion that, apparently, nobody has bothered to explain to him.

Even an obvious failure is no reason for Medvedev to change his mind about something. For two years running, Russians have complained that Medvedev, in his futile battle with time, moved the clock's hour hand in the wrong direction and completely disregarded the realities of geography in setting the time zones. Even though the Earth has not become any less round as a result and the sun stubbornly continues to move from east to west at its former speed, the prime minister remains unmoved. Medical officials report that Russians are experiencing a rise in nervous disorders, depression and suicides. Teachers complain that children are constantly tired and unable to concentrate on their studies, and the International Olympic Committee questions how it will be able to organize broadcasts from the Winter Games. Even President Vladimir Putin has hinted that it might be good to reconsider the decision. However, Medvedev is adamant: nyet means nyet.

When the Audit Chamber and later the Investigative Committee discovered that $800,000 was missing from the Skolkovo project budget, the public, long accustomed to far larger sums disappearing from government coffers, barely reacted to the news. But what difference does it really make whether money is stolen from Skolkovo? In the end, everything spent on the project is a loss for Russia anyway. That money would have been better spent on improving existing research facilities, reviving and developing remaining scientific districts such as Akademgorodok, developing infrastructure or at least purchasing the necessary technology to re-equip domestic industry. Unfortunately, all those tasks are not ambitious enough. Only something grandiose, high-sounding and clearly pointless can capture the imagination of Russia's government officials.

Another ambitious project is the plan to turn Moscow into an international financial center. Do Russia's leaders really expect businessmen from Wall Street, Frankfurt and London to abandon their jobs, wives and mistresses and rush to Moscow, transfer their capital here, open up offices and hire Central Asians as cleaning staff, sign up for Russian classes and apply for residence permits?

And now we have Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin offering to protect Russia from meteorites for a cool 58 billion rubles ($1.9 billion). He wants to use the money over the next 10 years even though the next meteorite isn't expected for half a century. I wonder who will be held accountable for what in such a program.

Mid-level officials who plunder public monies are just small-time, unimaginative amateurs compared with senior officials, who carry out the really ambitious plans. Those large-scale projects, like financial leviathans, swallow up more taxpayer money in a single gulp than all the petty thieves combined. What's more, the larger the scope, the easier it is to steal.

It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. However, it seems that the leaders do the paving and the citizens do the walking. Why is it that the prime minister and his Cabinet members never shiver from the cold in high-rise apartment buildings that lack

central heating because their water pipes have frozen and burst? Moreover, the electricity in the White House is never turned off after the latest freezing rain. Government officials never suffer when hospitals are shut down, and their family members aren't affected when the number of schools and universities is cut. The city of Moscow has more money than it knows what to do with, but regional budgets are plunging into bankruptcy. To each his own, as they say.

But one thing is certain: Dreamer-in-Chief Medvedev will make sure that Russia's road to hell is a modern, four-lane highway with plenty of room for all.

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