

Warning for Putin in Chavez's Hospital Stay

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On March 5, Venezuelan authorities announced that President Hugo Chavez died. Whether he actually died on that day or on a previous date remains unclear. In any event, Chavez died from cancer that was clearly complicated by poor medical care that he received in Cuba. He turned to Cuban oncologists apparently because there were few other places he could go for cancer treatment.

The Cuban medical care that Chavez received is on par with Soviet medicine of the 1960s: free for everyone and technologically outdated by decades. To receive first-rate treatment, Chavez would have had to travel to the U.S, but this was clearly out of the question. How could he be seen in a world-renown U.S. cancer clinic when he built his political career and reputation among Venezuela's downtrodden as the leading opponent of U.S. imperialism and global hegemony?

In today's world, the only way to create high-quality medical care like in the U.S. is to devote resources and technology to treat the masses. Creating an elite medical system for the ruling class has proven ineffective and largely impossible. Take, for example, the well-known case

of when President Vladimir Putin's friend, who heads a huge state corporation, suffered from kidney stones. He decided to be a true patriot and seek treatment in Russia. Through his Kremlin connections, he instructed an elite hospital for state officials to purchase the latest equipment and then sent the doctors abroad for training on how to use it. The equipment was installed, the doctors returned home and the first operation on a human guinea pig was successful. Not surprisingly, the Russian doctors tore up his kidney along with the kidney stone, and the patient barely survived.

That is precisely why top-level Russian bureaucrats and millionaires, who could pay any price for good treatment in Russia, if it were available, are forced to go to Tel Aviv's Ichilov Hospital, for example, where they wait in line alongside Israeli pensioners.

Modern populism, which promises to give the people everything they want and for free, cannot provide quality medical care, a basic and fundamental social service. Medical care is a commodity in today's world, and it is dispensed on a complex, high-technology mass conveyor called modern hospitals. To cover the enormous costs involved, this conveyor must cater to the masses, but it cannot be free. What's more, because of the ongoing discoveries of new treatments and medications, the price of this commodity is constantly rising at paces that have historically well exceeded inflation.

The concept that medical care is a commodity demolishes the myth of Venezuelan populism —namely, that medical care can be both free and high-quality. It also debunks the myth that Russian millionaires can buy anything they want in Russia. Unfortunately, in Russia first-class medical care is not on the menu and can't be ordered a la carte.

It seems that this paradox of modern medicine — that quality health care should be for the masses but can't be free — is capable of destroying both populist myths and oligarchic societies. The only way for modern society to provide high-quality medical treatment is to maintain a free-market economy in which the majority of adult citizens are earning enough money to pay for their own medical treatment, and only the outstanding and exceptional cases are handled by society as a whole.

After Chavez's death, Putin is probably thinking about the possibility that he could also be stricken with a severe illness like cancer. If this were to happen, where could Putin find top medical treatment if he needed it? In Cuba?

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