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The Ponomaryov Principle

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State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov once said, "To steal one ruble, it is first necessary to spend nine inefficiently." That slogan should adorn the entrance to the Skolkovo technology park as its official motto.

Scientists and scholars predicted from the outset that nothing good would come from the Skolkovo venture. The project was not designed in response to a concrete need or to fulfill a clearly defined task. It was simply dreamed up by a group of senior officials who know

nothing about science or technological research. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has given countless speeches about the need for innovation and modernization, hoping that the endless repetition of those two words would produce, like an incantation, a magical effect upon the economy even as it continued to lose its scientific and technological potential. Meanwhile, entrepreneurial individuals close to him found ways to waste or misappropriate billions of rubles of budgetary funds.

Most observers found the very idea that Russia could recreate a Silicon Valley by presidential decree to be ludicrous. The real Silicon Valley in California did not emerge as some abstract center of innovation but was organized by the U.S. military-industrial complex to create reliable communications systems for objects flying at high speeds and altitudes. Those space and aviation projects required new electronics and all research was directly tied to the demands of production. The scientists were brought together in a single geographic location because secrecy and control over the work had to be maintained, and they had to be in physical proximity to collaborate effectively. Personal computers, mobile communications and Internet technology were all byproducts of defense programs and together have led to what is now called the post-industrial era.

Silicon Valley continues to draw countless young high-tech professionals but now for entirely different reasons: its pleasant climate, comfortable living conditions and the chance to meet interesting people.

In many ways, Skolkovo was the exact opposite of Silicon Valley from the very beginning. The emphasis was on private business, not a cooperative effort to solve a larger scientific or technical challenge. Nobody can say in advance which concrete result they are even working toward except to speak in generalities about "innovation."

Such "innovations" have nothing in common with solid scientific research and discoveries carried out by different methods and in other locales. At the very least, it is strange to spend millions of dollars on a dubious undertaking when existing scientific centers, institutes and communities such as Akademgorodok are tottering on the edge of extinction. Scientists from a range of countries were invited to simply drop work they had been pursuing for many years, abandon the laboratories they had developed at great effort, walk away from their ordered lives and their circle of professional and personal contacts, and all only to move to Skolkovo, an awkward set of buildings rising up amid wide open muddy fields.

The current corruption scandals clearly demonstrate that Skolkovo has already failed as a scientific and technological project but has proven an amazing success as a place where millions of dollars can be given out to the right people without their having to account for work accomplished.

Today, Duma deputies are indignantly asking why the Skolkovo project has paid out nearly $750,000 to Ponomaryov, who at the time of the contract had no experience in high technology or innovation projects. But it was he who formulated the principle on which the entire Skolkovo venture was built. The others have not even made that much of a contribution to science.

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