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Russia Loses Without Guriev

By Anders Aslund

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The news that prominent economist Sergei Guriev has been forced to leave Russia under legal pressure is truly shocking because he is not a member of the opposition but an eminent representative of the liberal wing of the establishment. If Guriev is compelled to leave the country, any Russian citizen can face that fate.

Guriev, 41, is a truly outstanding individual. He was trained as an economist at the Massachusettes Institute of Technology and Princeton University and has an impressive record of academic publications in the foremost international journals, with particular interest in the role of oligarchs and the economics of happiness. At the tender age of 32, he became the president of the New Economic School, a distinguished graduate program in Moscow, which he has developed into the best economics education not only in Russia, but on the European continent as well.

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Guriev, whom I have known for two decades, is one of the greatest Russian networkers and public performers. Quickly and with a good sense of humor, he seizes the essence of a subject and explains it to any audience technically or plainly, in an academic journal or in a newspaper article, at venues like the World Economic Forum and the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

He is everybody's favorite Russian economist. The Peterson Institute for International Economics, where I work, has happily pursued its Russia Balance Sheet project with him, which resulted in the book "Russia after the Global Economic Crisis."

Guriev is a popular speaker everywhere, in Moscow as well as in Washington. He has been a member of at least five Russian corporate boards, including state-dominated Sberbank. What surprised those of us who knew him was how he could manage it all and yet still respond to all e-mails instantly, even in the wee hours of the morning. As his colleague, he always has been kind and honest, seemingly never making an enemy.

Until now, that is.

How could such a nice guy get into trouble? The irony is that he has not been politically active. On the contrary, he has been the consummate insider, a member of numerous government economic councils.

Commenting on his departure this week, Minister of Open Government Mikhail Abyzov even said he and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev would continue to keep in touch with Guriev online. The radical opposition has complained that Guriev has stayed a member of the establishment, although he has never hidden his liberal views, being a regular columnist in Vedomosti.

One of the problems is apparently that he has been too close to Medvedev. The other, perhaps more important accusation against Guriev is that he has maintained close personal ties to the leading anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, who is likely on his way to prison for no crime other than opposing Putin and exposing official corruption.

Most absurdly, Guriev is being held responsible for the New Economic School having received funds from Yukos, the oil company run by jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, before Guriev became its president.

Last December, the New Economic School celebrated its 20th anniversary with an excellent

conference in Moscow. Prominent speakers were First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, one of the first graduates of the university. Yet the sponsors were mainly foreign companies and private Russian individuals. I asked Guriev whether the New Economic School would suffer from the law on foreign agents, but he responded that educational institutions were excluded. Officially, he was right, but what is in the law itself doesn't always matter in Russia today, as Guriev's departure shows.

Guriev's forced departure is a devastating blow to civil society and freedom in Russia. It shows how sharply freedom of expression has been restricted. The authorities have made plain their disrespect for education and research of the highest quality.

Guriev's exit is likely to be followed by a reinforced flow of young talented Russians out of the country, and the Kremlin can forget about quality education because it cannot thrive under such restrictive conditions.

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