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No Place for Guriev in Putin's Russia

By Alexei Bayer

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Sergei Guriev's decision to resign as dean of the New Economic School and to stay abroad was widely discussed in Russia and in the West. Not only is Guriev an internationally respected economist, but his school was a top-notch, world-renowned educational institution.

Worse, Guriev was a government adviser and exclusive member of the ruling elite. Indeed, his hasty emigration to Paris, which has been linked to a possible new criminal case against jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, is a watershed.

Yet the attack on Guriev is a part of a larger trend. The Kremlin has been systematically removing competent people in government. In September 2011, then-President Dmitry Medvedev fired Alexei Kudrin, his highly respected finance minister.

More recently, the process has accelerated. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov was dismissed in November. He was submerged in allegations of corruption, but this has never been a career impediment in today's Russia. His real crime, however, was to rationally decide to rearm the Russian military with foreign weapons rather than overpriced and obsolete ones produced by the domestic armaments industry.

Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov's turn came up last month. He may have been sleazy and sly, but as former Kremlin ideology chief he was certainly effective. And now Guriev.

Booting out competent professionals is only the latest of the Russian government's illogical, self-destructive moves. These moves included supporting pariah states, thus antagonizing Western partners, willfully ignoring trends in global natural gas markets and trying to stage the Winter Olympics in subtropical Sochi. Following this trend, the State Duma has passed a slew of foolish laws that have been met with ridicule and outrage in Russia and abroad.

Yet none of this farce and incompetence threatens the regime of President Vladimir Putin. God knows, since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Russia has seen its share of craziness, ineptitude and suicidal behavior. Joseph Stalin built a system designed to ferret out and jail or shoot anyone competent or honest. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made irrational decisions on the spot, such as planting corn in permafrost. This should have been enough to destroy any government, but the Soviet regime endured and fell only after Leonid Brezhnev stupidly decided to invade Afghanistan, "the graveyard of empires".

Based on historic precedent, Guriev's departure should actually play into the hands of the regime. Pushing opponents abroad is an old practice in Russia. Vladimir Lenin substituted mass executions of "bourgeois professionals" with forced emigration. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet KGB likewise got rid of various dissidents by pushing them out of the country on Israeli visas. Following the wave of protests since 2011 and the subsequent government crackdown on the opposition, more and more competent Russians, who can easily find employment abroad, are thinking of leaving, just as Guriev has done.

But Guriev is not the only member of the country's establishment to have left. He just did it more openly. Practically all the mainstays of the Putin regime — from its ordinary foot soldiers in the bureaucracy to top bureaucrats and officials — have emigrated, at least in spirit They have acquired property in Europe and the U.S., they themselves or members of their families have large sums squirreled away in foreign banks, and their children have residency permits abroad. If the regime seriously starts to totter, if street protests resume and become larger in scope, or if oil prices decline substantially, the vertical-power structure will tumble down like a house of cards.

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