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Sri Lanka Is Good Example for Russia to Follow

By Kim Iskyan

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Sri Lanka — an Ireland-sized island just south of India, not far from the equator — isn't an obvious source of insight or inspiration for Russia. Russia's economy is nearly 20 times that of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is as reliant on importing commodities as Russia is on exporting them. Replace the Russian winter's snow with palm trees, and you'd have a general picture of Sri Lanka. Its cuisine is as spicy as Russian food is bland. Sri Lanka produces tea — and Russia drinks it.

But there are plenty of similarities. Like Russia, Sri Lanka is a stew of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural traditions and groups who frequently aren't good at sharing the sandbox with each other. Both countries have had numerous invaders and interlopers laying claim to their territory. Both have faced brutal domestic wars — Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war ended in 2009 while the conflict in Chechnya quietly grinds on — which will reverberate in the cultural consciousness for generations.

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Finally, Russia and Sri Lanka are both run by strongmen who smash ants of opposition with a sledgehammer. They both toss potential pretenders to power into prison on embarrassingly bogus charges. Journalists in both countries are wise to take out sizable life insurance policies; Russia placed 148th in Reporters Without Borders' 2013 World Press Freedom Index, while Sri Lanka clocked in at 162nd.

With tongue firmly planted in cheek, what could Russia — and, perhaps in particular, President Vladimir Putin — learn from comparative minnow Sri Lanka and its president, Mahinda Rajapaksa? A few thoughts:

• Keep it in the family. Rajapaksa, in addition to being president, is Sri Lanka's finance minister. One brother is the minister of defense. Another brother is the minister of economic development. A fourth is the speaker of the parliament. Another, who lives in Texas, takes care of family business. One of the president's sons is a member of parliament and perhaps a potential successor to his father. This way, the most powerful people in the country can have power struggles around the family dinner table. And no matter who wins and who loses, it all stays in the family.

In contrast, Putin's "family" is comprised largely of his judo buddies and other billionaires. For all of the attention he's granted to his actual related-by-blood family — his wife Lyudmila hadn't been seen in public for years until early June — they may as well be living in their own Kremlin on Mars.

Unlike Rajapaksa, Putin doesn't have any living siblings to lean on. But he does have two daughters. Maybe it's not too late for them to join the family business, also following the examples of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Putin might be more inclined to leave office before 2024 if he can hand power to someone he can trust — the kind of trust that blood lines can ensure. Russia's opposition, like Sri Lanka's, probably wouldn't be keen on the idea, though.

• Develop the semiotics of fear. For years, thousands of Sri Lankans who were deemed troublesome have disappeared — or rather, been disappeared — by white vans. The white van has become part of the cultural and political shorthand for the repression and fear that grips large segments of the island.

Putin's Russia doesn't really have an analogous iconography of violence and repression. The baklava-clad OMON trooper lacks symbolic subtlety. The imagery of the truncheon is also a bit, well, blunt. Fortunately, the Kremlin's western PR handlers — now that they've conquered the challenge of improving the image of investment in Russia — might be up to the task of finding a suitable signifier of scary.

• Gaze from afar. Giant pictures of Rajapaksa — clad in a flowing, ethereal snow-white gown — gaze, "1984"-like, from myriad billboards and walls in Sri Lanka. The president's gentle smile gleams with benevolence from a block away. Yes, the United Nations is still investigating just how many tens of thousands of people died in possible war crimes perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government during the closing days of the country's civil war in 2009, but Rajapaksa still manages to evoke and ooze pure, benign wisdom.

Putin's image is Siberian to Rajapaksa's tropical summer. But if the muzhik thing begins to wear even more thin for Putin — or the chiropractor vetoes any more adventures in tiger shooting or bird flying — Russia's president could consider a similar image makeover. - Dyadya Vova, strumming on his balalaika, wearing a polo shirt and khakis, staring dreamingly into the sky as he waves, Pope-like, to the adoring masses? It could work.

• Get in on the China gig. Some political scientists and foreign policy analysts are convinced that China is engaging in a stealth takeover of the Pacific and its shipping lines, in part by buying the loyalty of small but geopolitically strategic specks of land in the Indian Ocean. As part of this strategy, China has funneled billions of dollars to Sri Lanka in white elephant projects that offer little hope of much return — except perhaps some political good will.

Mountains of — in effect — free money could buy a few roads in Sochi, with hillocks to spare for other worthwhile projects. But currently, Russia and China, as commodities producer and commodities buyer respectively, are on opposite sides of the table.

How could Russia find a way to become a pet geopolitical project of China's — and perhaps hike the price of oil by just a bit along the way? It may be worth Putin's while to sit down with Sri Lankan leader Rajapaksa to brainstorm. They would drink, of course, tea.

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