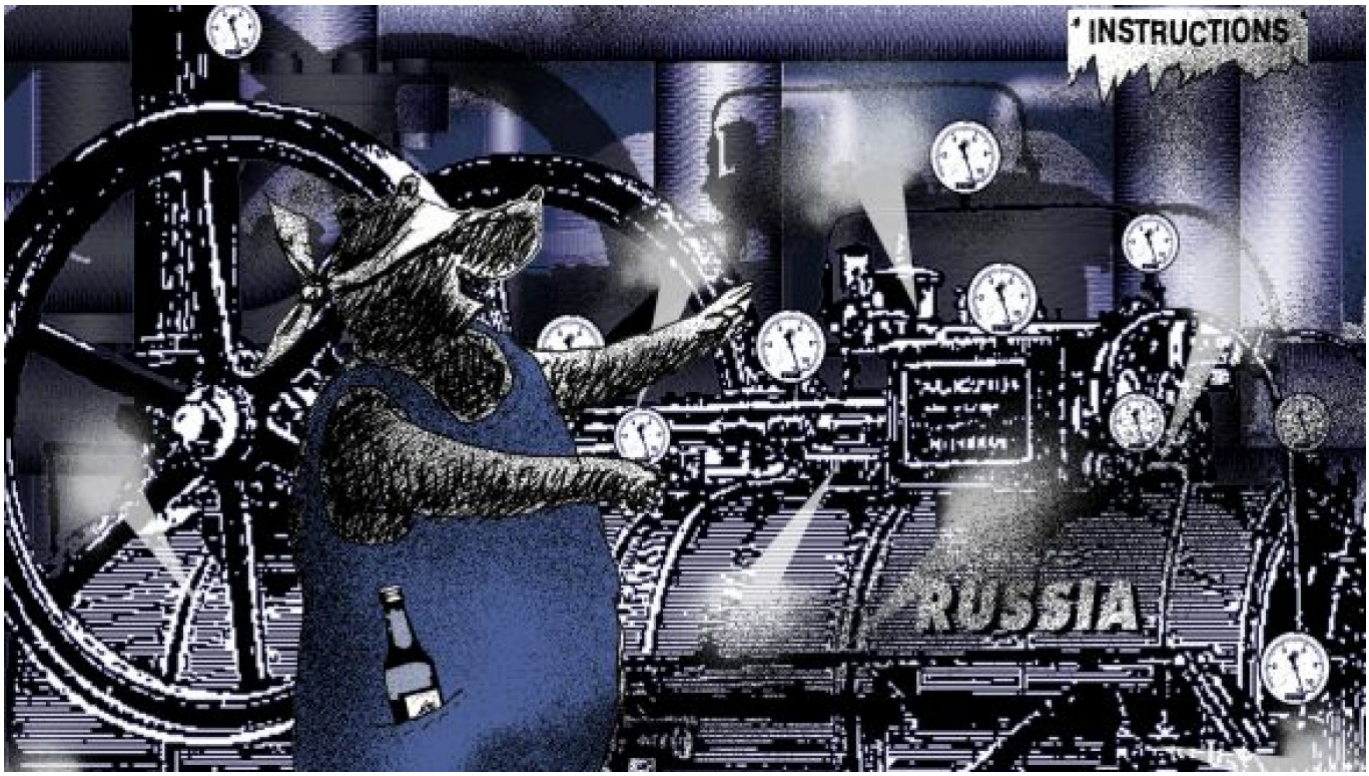
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Carelessness as a Russian National Trait

By Michael Bohm

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Russians have had trouble shaking off one stereotype for centuries: razgildyaistvo, or negligence and carelessness. Razgildyaistvo, some say, is as Russian as long, cold winters — a Russian institution of its own making.

How accurate is this stereotype?

Prominent historian and journalist Leonid Mlechin perhaps put it best: "Razgildyaistvo is part of the Russian character for the simple reason that Russians often have difficulty following rules and instructions. The Russian workplace is all too often defined by a lack of discipline and system of control."

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winters. It has gotten so bad that Medvedev has classified it as a national threat.

Here are eight recent examples of razgildyaistvo:

1. The crash of the Proton-M rocket in early July. The main cause of the accident: When the velocity sensor was installed on the rocket, the plus and minus poles were reversed, somewhat like putting a battery in a flashlight upside-down. A routine inspection before the launch would have revealed this simple mishap, but for some reason this wasn't performed. As a result, the rocket, which carried three Glonass satellites worth $75 million, received false information regarding its alignment and crashed within 17 seconds. To make matters worse, the satellites were not insured.

When another Proton-M rocket failed to take off last August, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, speaking to Cabinet ministers, singled out "traditional razgildyaistvo" as a factor in a string of satellite launch crashes and other failures dating back to 2010. This includes one blatant case when employees added 1 1/2 tons of fuel to the rocket above the required level, which went completely unnoticed by inspectors. Pointing to these numerous incidents of gross negligence and carelessness, Medvedev scolded ministers, saying, "We are losing our reputation and billions of rubles."

2. An explosion at a military ammunitions storage facility in the Orenburg region in June last year. As a result of lax safety rules, soldiers were allowed to smoke near the ammunition and to bring forbidden flammable liquids into a restricted area. Similar safety violations were responsible for recent explosions at weapons facilities in Ulyanovsk, Udmurtia and Bashkiria.

3. The fire at the Khromaya Loshad (Lame Horse) nightclub in Perm in 2009. Although the club was designed to hold only 50 people, 300 were allowed to attend an event devoted to the club's eighth anniversary. Club owners allowed a performance artist to throw pyrotechnics into the air from the stage. The club was quickly overcome with fire and smoke after sparks from the pyrotechnics hit a highly flammable plastic covering on the ceiling. Despite yearly government fire-safety inspections, one of the main doors was locked, and the emergency exit was hidden from view at the back of the stage. A total of 152 people died.

4. In March 2007, 63 people died in a retirement home in the Krasnodar region. Emergency exits were blocked, and metal grates covered the windows on the first floor. Three months ago, similar violations led to 38 deaths when a fire destroyed a psychiatric institution in the Moscow region. Over the past 15 years, there have been more than 20 fires in retirement homes and medical institutions, all directly linked to fire-safety violations, despite yearly government inspections. As a result, 325 people died.

5. In 2008 at a sanatorium in Pyatigorsk, a nurse performing enemas on vacationers used hydrogen peroxide instead of water because she mixed up the containers. Fortunately, the victims suffered no serious consequences besides embarrassment and unexpected

notoriety from headlines. But far more serious instances of razgildyaistvo among doctors and nurses are notoriously widespread in the country — from mixing up babies in maternity hospitals to giving HIV-infected blood to patients. One of the biggest problems is misdiagnoses of diseases, which occurs 30 percent of the time, according to The League for the Defense of Patients. (In comparison, U.S. doctors misdiagnose about 4 percent of cases.)

There are no official statistics available, but nongovernmental organizations estimate that the number of Russian deaths resulting from medical malpractice ranges from 50,000 to 300,000 per year. (In the U.S., which has a population twice as large, the official figure is about 195,000 per year.)

6. The 2000 sinking of the Kursk nuclear submarine, which went to sea on a training exercise to fire two torpedos, offers a genuine cocktail of razgildyaistvo.

First, the submarine had powerful cruise missiles on board that were extraneous to the exercises and should have been left on shore, in accordance with the Navy's rules and regulations. Instead, the captain seemingly decided that unloading the missiles would take too much time and that the risk of keeping them onboard was acceptable.

Second, the test torpedos' lifespan had long passed. They were leaking acid and were an obvious explosion hazard. Instead of refusing to test the damaged torpedos, the captain apparently decided to take this risk as well. Not surprisingly, one torpedo exploded on board, leading to the explosion of a cruise missile, which was the direct cause of the boat's sinking, according to independent experts.

Finally, someone decided to weld the rescue buoy of the Kursk to the boat. After all, the argument went, what are the odds of the Kursk sinking in the ocean? Submarines sink far less frequently than fires break out in retirement homes or nightclubs. Yet when the Kursk did sink and there was no functioning buoy to help locate it, the rescue mission was slowed down by hours. All 118 sailors on board died.

7. The Yaroslavl plane crash in 2011 that killed 37 members of the Lokomotiv hockey team. In this case, the pilots were poorly trained. One pilot activated the brakes as the plane was supposed to take off. An autopsy also found a depressant in the co-pilot's blood that could have slowed his reaction when he tried to respond to the emergency. Yak-Service, the company operating the aircraft, had violated basic safety standards in the past, and the federal aviation authority was lax in regulating its activities.

8. The explosion on the Nerpa nuclear submarine in 2008. A sailor who should not have had access to the fire-extinguishing system activated it for no apparent reason, reportedly entering a secret code that was written in pencil on the control panel. As a result, two compartments were flooded with Freon gas, killing 20 people by asphyxiation.

Of course, carelessness and negligence occurs in every culture. Take the U.S., for example. The country's ill-preparedness for 9/11, the 2005 New Orleans flood, the Boston Marathon bombing and even the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack are just a few examples. Or, more recently, the fact that U.S. Private Bradley Manning was allowed to receive and maintain his security clearance despite clear signs of emotional instability and psychological problems.

Nonetheless, Russian razgildyaistvo differs from Western negligence in both form and frequency. It would be difficult to imagine, for example, U.S. soldiers being allowed to smoke near a munitions warehouse or U.S. retirement homes year after year blocking emergency fire exits.

Another key difference is that in the West there are mechanisms and systems in place to investigate and punish those who are responsible, which significantly lowers the chances that these mistakes will be repeated in the future. But in many of the Russian cases — particularly involving violations of fire-safety standards — these mechanisms are largely absent, which means that the same negligence and rules violations are repeated over and over again.

Russian authorities like to step up inspections after a tragedy. But rather than helping avert accidents, they tend to be short-lived and accompanied by an increase in bureaucracy and, of course, corruption.

After the Perm nightclub fire, Medvedev expressed his anger, saying, "Razgildyaistvo has turned into a national threat."

Hopefully, President Vladimir Putin was listening. Forget the U.S. and NATO. Razgildyaistvo is a much larger threat to Russia's national security.

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