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Putin Imposes Simplicity on Complex World

By Georgy Satarov

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Three weeks before Russian President Vladimir Putin's first election victory, in March 2000, his campaign released a book, ''First Person: Conversations With Vladimir Putin,'' based on 24 hours of interviews with three journalists. With quotes like "Life is such a simple thing, really," the book revealed a key belief that would underlie Putin's leadership style: Simplicity can and must be imposed on a complex world.

This world view, which today pervades the Russian establishment, was not developed by Putin himself; it was introduced by a think tank established in December 1999 and headed by German Gref, who would later become economic development and trade minister under Putin.

In anticipation of Putin's victory, Gref's Center for Strategic Research invited experts to develop two programs — one focused on the economy and the other on public administration reform — based on one fundamental directive: Don't complicate things.

Fifteen years later, Putin's ideology, policies and activities all reflect this obsession with simplification of systems and structures. The separation of powers in government is too inefficient, so the presidency must dominate all other branches.

The large number of political parties, each with its own platform, is too complicated, so it must be replaced by a short list of a few accepted parties, with one main (and permanent) representation of power. Freedom of expression facilitates an unproductive cacophony of outrage, so the media must receive clear directives to guide their reporting.

There were also, according to Putin's regime, too many public institutions performing too many activities with insufficient oversight, so they were made smaller and given specific tasks from a short centralized list of priorities. Multiple higher courts were too difficult to maintain, so a single court replaced them.

Like systems and institutions, problem-solving was also simplified. Instead of developing a nuanced solution to a multifaceted problem — an approach that would involve careful thought, not to mention mistakes and adjustments — every issue, from official corruption to business management, was viewed as one-dimensional.

The Putin regime's aversion to complexity has intensified over time, moving from the relatively innocuous belief that simplicity translates into clarity, manageability, predictability and safety, to the dangerous conclusion that complexity itself — inherently unpredictable and often impenetrable — is a threat.

Complex or convoluted ideas and institutions, viewed as a product of forceful punditry, deliberately produced by the enemy to baffle and hurt Russia, are to be quashed at all costs.

This black-and-white perspective may seem like a continuation of the Soviet-era world view. But, in the 1990s, Russia had made significant progress toward modernization — and not just because it began to adopt Western-style state institutions.

In fact, the main driver of Russia's modernization was the formation of a new social order based on freedom, diversity and a recognition that the modern world was rich in opportunities for self-actualization, whether in the arts, business, science or politics.

But before a modern open society was fully established or the associated mindset entrenched, it was overtaken by Putin's "simple is better" approach. The view that individual opportunity and heterodoxy should be subordinated to overall predictability empowered the political elite to claim omniscience and cite outside interference as the main threat to Russia's future.

Driven by these beliefs, a union of "liberals" attempted to bring about a kind of bureaucratic modernization, having convinced themselves that liberal political outcomes could somehow be orchestrated by corrupt bureaucracy through limited democratic institutions. Not surprisingly, they failed.

Within just a few years it became clear not only that in an inescapably complex world "simple" solutions do not yield results, but also that restrictions on democracy, together with top-down bureaucratic control, create ideal conditions for personal enrichment.

The destruction of democratic institutions was now being driven both by the desire

for simplicity and by pure greed. The Russian proverb "Simplicity is worse than theft" proved oddly prescient.

The latest victim in the Putin regime's quest for simplicity is science. While science was not initially deemed a threat, within today's tightly restricted social and political order, it has emerged as a symbol of autonomy and diversity.

That is why, after being elected for his third term as president, Putin asserted full control over the Russian Academy of Sciences.

More recently, the Ministry of Justice added the Dynasty Foundation, established in 2002 by the well-known scientist and telecommunications mogul Dmitry Zimin, to its list of "foreign agents," most likely with the goal of stifling the organization's efforts to build a modern scientific community. (The "foreign funding" that the foundation receives — the reason it was flagged — comes, according to Zimin, from his own bank accounts.)

This repression has had a serious impact on the scientific community, with Russia's top scientific minds — unwilling to remain in an environment where greed and corruption stifle creativity and exploration — joining investors and capital in fleeing the country.

From 1990 to 2010, around 70 percent of Russia's leading mathematicians. Biologists, chemists, engineers and other experts have also been emigrating in search of better opportunities. These trends will only accelerate as Putin's regime intensifies its assault on the field.

The oppressive atmosphere of gray, government-imposed simplicity has finally insinuated itself into every sphere of Russian life. One hopes that when Putin's reign ends — as it inevitably will, perhaps even soon — Russians will understand that the path toward an open, modern society is never a simple one.

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