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Taming Russia's Professionals

By Harley Balzer

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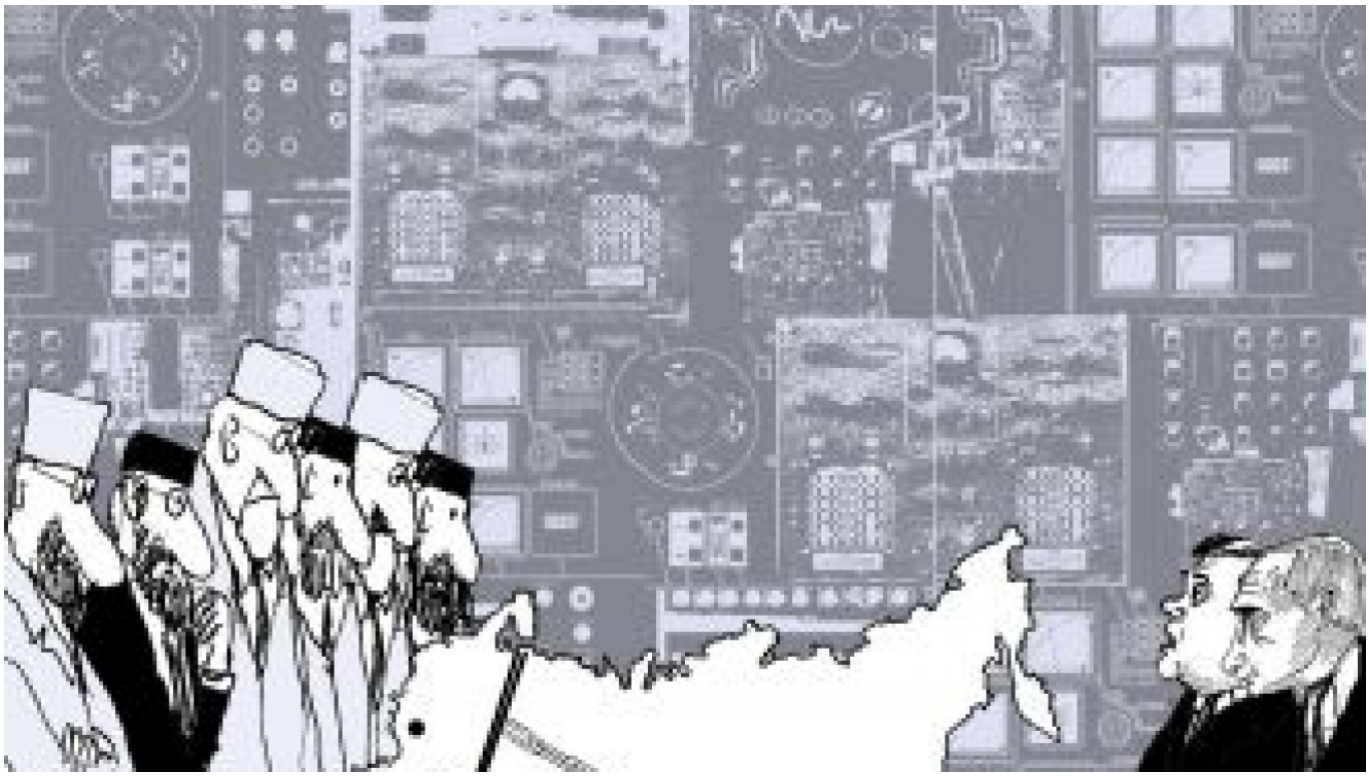

Large segments of the Russian elite, including advisers to both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, now say that only a more open, democratic political system can move Russia from its current resource model to a more dynamic, less corrupt economy based on innovation. Unfortunately, history offers few examples of elites willingly surrendering their wealth and power simply because it would benefit broader society.

One possible alternative path for broader participation in policy would be for professional groups to enjoy greater autonomy and greater responsibility in establishing standards and ethical codes. While there are few examples of positive development in recent years, the barriers are enormous.

Most Russian professions remain dominated by specialists trained in the Soviet era who have a direct personal interest in the knowledge base and practices that evolved under communism. The emigration of many talented young people reduces pressure for change. Nationalism and insistence on "Russian practices" underlie successful resistance to becoming more like their peers in the international community.

The combination of Soviet professional norms, group interests and personal financial incentives not only removes an important constituency for political change, but produces badly flawed policies on:

1. Demography. The Russian government is aware of the magnitude of the demographic problem, but its policy response favors advice from amateurs. The most egregious variants assert that an "ethnos" threatened with demographic demise responds by increasing births, while accusing professional demographers of kowtowing to the West. Politicians desperate for good sound bites have endorsed the positive results proclaimed by designers of the "maternity capital" solution, conflating births resulting from a short-term increase in the number of women aged 20 to 29 with a change in the total fertility rate. After 2011, the birth rate will decline for decades without significant policy interventions.

Russia's professional demographers are well-acquainted with policies that have been relatively successful in France and Sweden. But these programs are complex, expensive and long-term. Throwing money at the problem appears to offer an immediate solution, even if the result is just a temporary increase in the birth rate. One-time cash payments packaged as "maternity capital" are much easier to provide than adequate housing, day-care programs, preschools and extended maternity leave, much less altering the behavior of physicians, midwives and maternity hospital administrators to make the experience of childbirth less unpleasant.

2. Medicine. Soviet medical professionals were convinced that their methods were the best. Sometimes they were correct, but more often than not they weren't. The legacy is a system with primary care physicians so poorly paid that half the medical school graduates never practice medicine. Medical community leaders reject treatments like substitution therapy for drug addicts or medication rather than institutionalization for tuberculosis patients. The tuberculosis story illustrates the combination of personal, institutional and professional interests. Institutionalization is what they were taught. More than 100 sanatoriums still operate, and they employ tens of thousands of staff.

3. Science. The stunning change in the relative power of Russia and China has no clearer indicator than data on science and technology. In 1990, Russian and Chinese scientists published about the same number of articles in international peer-reviewed journals. In 2010, Russian output remained at the 1990 level, while Chinese scientists published four times that number, overtaking Germany and Japan. The Chinese achieved this by emphasizing internationalization and creating incentives to publish in international journals. Chinese scientists returning from overseas are creating a "virtuous circle," insisting on international standards of peer review and professional conduct. Many talented Russian scientists have emigrated, while many who remain in the country prefer old patterns of research and publishing that do not require competition. Institute directors disburse money, while journal editors publish articles without peer review.

Near the end of the Brezhnev era, former U.S. economics professor Gertrude Schroeder described the Soviet Union as being on a "treadmill of reform." Incessant efforts to reform the "economic mechanism" failed because everyone had a stake in the existing, suboptimal system. The major players had learned how to make that system work for them, even if it did not produce economic results benefitting the entire country. Many understood that global

competition meant the system was increasingly less capable of maintaining the Soviet Union's position in the world. Although change was inevitable, self-interest and inertia were more powerful forces.

Russian professionals did take the lead in the country's one successful political revolution. In 1905, the Union of Unions brought together a broad front of professional and other groups demanding limited political change. More recently, some Russian professional groups have sought a positive role. Air traffic controllers demanded safer working conditions as well as higher pay. The Russian Political Science Association has sought to punish professors who accept bribes. Greater autonomy and more internationalized professional communities would also help reduce the outflow of talent.

The United States and Europe can assist Russian professional communities in establishing stronger identities and standards of behavior. This does not mean that Russians should become just like the West. The legal profession could insist on vetting judges and monitoring their fair administration of Russian law, while excluding corrupt lawyers. Teachers and researchers could insist on peer review and academic standards while rejecting side payments for admission to or decent grades in universities. Medical professionals could insist on accepted "best practices" recognized by international — not U.S. — medical organizations, where Russians participate in the deliberations.

Despite widespread calls for reform, Russia's coming electoral cycle does not promise to be much different from the past two. Independent and internationalized professional communities could offer an alternative path for change.

Harley Balzer served as executive director of the International Science Foundation and a member of the governing council of the Basic Research and Higher Education Program for Russia. He will participate in the session "Building Russia's Creative Capital" at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on Friday from 3:45 to 5 p.m.

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