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Hanging on by a Thread

By Konstantin Sonin

If there is anything Vladimir Putin's presidency has had in common with that of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, it is the desire to return the country to the path it was following prior to the 1917 Revolution. The 74 years of Communist leadership that followed involved a fruitless search for effective developmental models, but since 1991, things have been returning to what passes for normal. Even the recent noises from the proponents of the "Let's go back to the Soviet Union" approach actually have more in common with a return to pre-revolutionary conditions than to those under communism.

In the humanities, in fields of study like economics, political science, history and sociology, the return to normalcy often takes much longer than in actual political life. The re-establishment of a scientific school can be as difficult and take just as much time as the restoration of churches. So scholars who studied previously under some of the country's great thinkers and the students they have trained to carry on the work are invaluable to the academic restoration project. These are the important threads still linking us to the past.

On May 25, economist Valery Makarov turned 70. Markov is the director of the Central Economics and Mathematics Institute and academic secretary of the social sciences branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The fact that he received a telegram from Putin with congratulations on behalf of the Russian people was befitting of his status.

But there is something more than status at stake here. The unfortunate reality is that, although Russian mathematics has a rich history, the study of economics in the country does not. The list of economists whose work is studied in courses worldwide contains the names of just three Russians.

One, Eugene Slutsky, was an economist. The other two, Lev Pontryagin and Leonid Kantorovich, were great mathematicians. Makarov studied under Kantorovich, who was himself a student of Grigory Fikhtengolts and Vladimir Smirnov, who in turn graduated from the St. Petersburg school of mathematics under the eye of Pafnuty Chebyshev, one of Russia's first mathematicians.

Kantorovich, the only Russian to win the Nobel Prize for economics, had to pay more than once in Soviet times for the fact that his mathematical theorems occupied such an important role in economics. Karl Marx had already said everything there was to say about prices as far as the Communists were concerned. What could Lagrange coefficients have to add anyway? (Without going into details, it is worth noting that these coefficients are still used in setting prices in today's market economy, even if the people using them have never even heard of Italian mathematician Joseph Louis Lagrange.) Kantorovich's student, Makarov, and many other Soviet academics had to make sure they held the highest possible posts in the Soviet academic hierarchy if they were to have any hope of promoting their own views and of preserving the connections to earlier generations of scientists.

It is hard to say exactly which of Makarov's academic achievements will be remembered by science over the long term -- which is the most important perspective when it comes to economic theory. Maybe it will be his collaboration with Kantorovich, or his monograph on the mathematical theory of economic dynamics, or perhaps his founding of the New Economic School, the first institution of higher learning created after the collapse of the Soviet Union to have earned international recognition. It is even possible that Makarov's new brainchild -- the Advanced School of Public Administration at Moscow State University -- will not only provide education in the art of economic governance, but will significantly change the landscape in the field of economics itself.

Hamlet said: "The time is out of joint; o cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" We have the people to set things right. We just need to recognize them.

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