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## A Russian Issue for the G8

By Konstantin Sonin

Russia holds the Group of Eight presidency this year and hosts the leaders of major industrialized democracies at a summit in St. Petersburg scheduled for July. If successful, the summit would boost Russia's status within the international community and deliver a personal triumph for President Vladimir Putin.

With so much riding on Russia's presidency, Putin and his G8 point man, Igor Shuvalov, have gone out of their way to stress the three main issues that will define it: energy security, education and the battle against infectious diseases.

At first glance, energy security would seem to be the most interesting issue on the table. The price standoff between state-controlled Gazprom and Ukraine over the New Year's holiday led to a reduction in supplies to Europe for the first time in decades, and made energy security a hot-button issue. And the phrase "energy security" itself has a fashionably ominous ring to it. This issue will not lead to serious discussion, however. The G8 members would rather tackle this strategic challenge on their own. U.S. President George W. Bush made abundantly clear in his state of the union address last month that the United States will look out for itself.

The battle against infectious diseases also promises little in the way of productive dialogue. For the other G8 member countries -- Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and the United States -- this issue boils down to a decision about how much money to kick in for humanitarian reasons so that their own pharmaceutical companies will develop unprofitable medicines destined for poor people in poor countries. A host of important questions needs to be answered, such as whether the governments of these countries should purchase medicines directly from the pharmaceutical companies or spend the money to protect the companies' patents. But Russia has no part to play in this discussion, because we are not a major producer or exporter of pharmaceuticals.

This leaves the issue of education, which is both pressing and extremely complex. In terms of the level of general education, Russia belongs to the developed, not the developing world. But our education system isn't just lagging behind the times, it's fast becoming obsolete. Primary and secondary education are on the mend now that the government has freed up some funding, but higher education is in a terrible state, and no one seems eager to do the hard work required to fix it.

When it comes to education, Russia does have common interests with the European countries, such as the loss of our best and brightest to the United States, which offers greater opportunity and better money. How can we attract highly qualified workers who have been trained at the best universities in the United States and Europe? How can we stop the brain drain without preventing young Russians from receiving the best possible education at institutions around the world? The need to identify a new strategic goal capable of spurring large-scale scientific advances -- as the arms and space races once did -- is a major challenge for the United States no less than for Russia.

Setting the agenda for our G8 presidency is only half the battle, however. Success or failure may come down to the question of who attends the July summit. In the White House these questions are decided by Vice President Dick Cheney, and he is a politician with strong opinions. If he believes that Russia has veered too far from the path of democracy, for example, it might not be possible to convince him otherwise. And if Bush stays away, the summit and Russia's entire presidency would be deemed a foreign policy failure, though it couldn't hurt to revisit the issue of education at the highest level.

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