

The Era of Diminished Expectations

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By Konstantin Sonin

Every politician knows there is nothing better than diminished expectations. In everyday life, we tend to view even banal statements positively if they are made by people who typically use expletives and speak abusively. But for politicians, the payoff is even greater. If voter expectations are low enough, leaders feel free to appoint unqualified friends and acquaintances to important posts and forego punishing corruption. And when ordinary citizens have given up believing that their well-being depends on the daily efforts of the authorities, then those officials also lose any incentive to perform their duties properly.

Moscow's newly appointed mayor and his entourage toured the city by brazenly driving on the wrong side of the road. But it's not like he killed anyone! (Really? No one is planning to apologize for this one?) Information has been published describing, if not outright theft by the state oil pipeline monopoly, then at least its outrageous inefficiency. But what's the big deal, managers steal from all state companies! The prime minister expressed his personal gratitude to the directors of that same company. And what of it? The truth is, any time the prime minister gets through a press conference without accusing someone of embezzlement, murder or collusion, that's already a good day. It means the markets will remain calm.

The president has drawn attention recently to the country's creeping political "stagnation." And that's good because, compared with his earlier statement that democracy is doing just fine in Russia, the recent remarks are a sign of progress. A minister is being targeted for inflammatory rhetoric that led to the savage beating of a journalist. But is that really a reason to show concern? Of course, if a video were produced showing the minister personally beating the reporter with an iron rod — then it would be time to start thinking about holding someone responsible.

Diminished expectations apply to everyone. A prominent television host nervously complained that TV journalists have essentially become government functionaries. Suddenly we've got a new Andrei Sakharov! (The fact that his comments were considered scandalous proves just how little we've come to expect from the country's top journalists.) An academician was caught plagiarizing, and from his letter to a newspaper it became clear that he had never even read a book published in his name. But there are plenty of other academicians who are far less educated and professional. (If we adopt the pseudo-scientific standards of Soviet-era biologist Trofim Lysenko, then almost anything goes.) A Russian university creates a ridiculous department that compromises the integrity of every diploma the institution has granted over the past 50 years. But what's so bad about that? It would have been even worse with a different rector. And it should go without saying that the comparison should be to a university where not half, but all of the famous researchers have left, and where all of the huge funding it has received over the past decade was simply stolen.

But things really aren't all that bad. Even in the era of diminished expectations, we're not about to forgive the trainer of the national football team for failing to qualify for a major tournament twice in a row, nor will we excuse socialite Ksenia Sobchak for her careless remarks or tasteless outfits.

Now we just need to be as demanding of our politicians as we are of the national football coach — or at least as tough as we are with Ksenia Sobchak.

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