Russia: Creating a Nation of Poor, Sick and Ignorant

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A new bill has been passed in Russia that will extensively roll back Government funding of education, the arts and social services - by introducing per capita financing - that will punish smaller towns and downgrade quality in the larger ones.

When initial reports appeared in the media that a new bill had been introduced that would alter the way the state regulates education, the arts and social services, many people refused to believe that it would actually be passed. But when deputies actually passed the bill, hope still remained that President Dmitry Medvedev would not sign it. But the law has been passed and signed.

The document is a death sentence for universal access to education and health care. By introducing a per capita financing structure, the law makes it financially impossible for rural and small-town schools, hospitals and clinics to continue functioning. Those that do continue operating will be forced to lower the quality of their work. This is because under the new law, the more students a teacher instructs and the more patients a doctor treats, the greater the funding their host institutions will receive from the state. In addition, schools, hospitals, museums and universities that currently receive insufficient state funding to cover their operating expenses will go bankrupt and close.

The new federal law represents a conscious attempt to destroy the progress Russia had achieved in the educational, social services and cultural spheres over the course of the 20th century. The same people who speak so passionately about modernizing Russia have made a decision that turns the country back to the 19th century — and I do not mean the 19th century of Western Europe, but of Russia, where villages and many small towns didn't have schools or hospitals.

Behind the attempt to destroy free and universal education and health care, there is a certain philosophy that views social services as being no different from commercial services offered on the free market. The fact that not everyone will be able to afford social services does not worry the authors of this law. Education and health care should become the privileges of a chosen few, just like the migalki, or flashing blue lights, placed on the top of cars, issued to a select group of influential bureaucrats and businesspeople, allowing them to close off streets at will and violate traffic rules with absolute impunity. The Russian authorities are busy creating and developing a national elite, and the tens of millions of ordinary citizens not belonging to that elite are of little interest to them.

Meanwhile, there is mounting evidence of resistance from society. Demonstrations protesting the new law have been staged in many cities. Until recently, teachers and doctors — both are government employees — were considered loyal supporters of the ruling party. They were instrumental in turning out the vote for United Russia, and they promoted its policies to their students and patients. They did this not so much out of conviction as out of necessity. State employees are in a vulnerable position and know better than to bite the hand that feeds them.

But now the authorities are taking a gamble. They are attempting to free themselves from the responsibility of funding social services and at the same time retain the loyalty of those most

affected by the decision. What will happen if this little trick doesn't go over well? Even if officials are able to prevent state employees from staging protests, it would be unrealistic to count on their continued support.

And if the authorities manage to actually put this law into practice it will be a dangerous mistake that could lead to a social explosion. But if the law is stopped, it will be a rare victory for the people over the government.

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