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Exceptions and Rules: Success Stories and Bad Governance in Russia

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Abstract. The paper is devoted to analysis of several success stories of certain state-directed developmental projects and programs in Russia (and beyond), which are designed and implemented amid conditions of bad governance and often demonstrate state achievements in various policy areas. I argue that these success stories do not serve as exceptions to the general rules of bad governance but rather confirm its overall tendencies. The prioritization of state support for successful projects and programs is related to conspicuous consumption of material and symbolic benefits by the political leadership and often performs compensatory functions. The analysis of several success stories as case studies addresses the questions of why and how they became short-lived and resulted in diminished returns and/or weak multiplicative effects. Thus, success stories become the other side of the coin for bad governance: these achievements are intertwined with the general trends of governing the state.

Russia is increasingly perceived as a case of bad governance—an intentionally built politico-economic order, which involves poor quality of state governance, far below expectations based on the degree of the country’s socio-economic development (Gel’man, 2017b; Zaostrovtssev, 2017).¹ However, the main objection to this description is related to the fact that Russia (both now and in the past) has demonstrated certain major achievements of state policies in various fields, and some state-directed projects and programs may be labeled success stories in international comparison. Recent achievements of this kind were analyzed at the level of several of Russia’s regions (Starodubtsev, 2017a; Yakovlev et al., 2017), of certain sectors of the economy (such as agriculture (Wengle, 2017)), and of some state agencies (such as the Central Bank (Johnson, 2016)). Their contribution is important and visible enough that one should not disregard these cases as minor and negligible exceptions the specifics of which merely confirm the overall rules of bad governance. At least, one has to pose a question about the causes and mechanisms, which allow successes amid the grim picture of notorious inefficiency, ubiquitous corruption and widespread rent-seeking involved in governing the Russian state. Moreover, the in-depth deviant case analysis of these outliers will aid better understanding of the general trends of bad governance through identification of its limits. In other words, when and under which conditions can the state happily convert itself from Saul to Paul the Apostle, at least for a while, and why may such a wonderful conversion occur in certain cases when in others it does not? The literature on developmental policies beyond the global West has paid attention to “pockets of efficiency” (Geddes, 1994) or “pockets of effectiveness” (Roll, 2014a)—state-directed priority projects which are intentionally designed and implemented under special conditions under the patronage of political leaders. Some of these projects have brought not only short-term successes but also major long-term returns and outlived their initial conditions and intentions. However, the list of causes of such success stories is quite diverse and includes a number of organizational, institutional, and technological factors, quality of management and personnel, and the like, which tend to be considered to be very country-specific and context-bounded (Roll, 2014b). Similar tendencies might be relevant for research on Russia. For example, Loren Graham in his comprehensive overview of

¹ For example, in 2017 Russia was rated 135th out of 176 countries in the annual Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International (alongside Kyrgyzstan, Honduras, and Paraguay) (https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017). In terms of the rule of law, it was rated 89th out of 113 countries, according to the World Justice Project (<https://worldjusticeproject.org/>); according to Worldwide Governance Indicators, the Control of Corruption index for Russia in 1996–2016 was -0.86 on a scale from -2.5 (the worst level) to +2.5 (the best level) (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>).

innovation projects in pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia focused on the efforts of certain creative individuals and collective drivers of technological progress vis-à-vis the rigid system of state governance and the political and institutional environment, which was unfavorable for developmental projects (Graham, 2013). Although it is hard to object to these observations, his focus of analysis left unanswered the question of why state policies sometimes paved the way to major breakthroughs (such as the Soviet space project, briefly mentioned by Graham), while sometimes they resulted only in a waste of resources. The analysis of success stories faces not only the need for conceptual homogenization of a very diverse empirical field even within the same country (let alone cross-national research) but also the framing of theoretical and disciplinary scholarly perspectives. For Barbara Geddes, the explanation of “pockets of efficiency” in Brazil and other Latin American states was driven entirely by institutional accounts (Geddes, 1994); the comparative analysis of Michael Roll mostly focused on the political leadership and organizational settings (Roll, 2014a, 2014b); and Graham, in turn, offered a path-dependent perspective of exceptional successes in Russia amid numerous failures (Graham, 2013). Thus, instead of generalization of analyses of success stories, the research agenda met with increasing fragmentation.

This paper does not aim to present universal and comprehensive explanations of success stories in Russia and beyond, but proposes a slightly different view on the causes and mechanisms of these phenomena. I argue that effective implementation of priority projects and programs by the Russian state might be understood as the other side of the coin of bad governance. First, the political leadership under conditions of bad governance needed success stories of the country’s development, not only in terms of policies but also as a tool of politics due to their effects on domestic and international legitimation of regimes and leaders. Second, the actual achievements of success stories may perform the functions of both material and symbolic conspicuous consumption in the eyes of elites and masses alike. Meanwhile, political demand for success stories provides certain incentives for policy entrepreneurs among mid-range and top-level bureaucrats, who may pursue their upward career mobility and/or priority status and funding while also working towards the achievement of some broadly defined developmental goals. The problem, however, is that these incentives for policy entrepreneurs are often unsustainable because of dependence upon patronage from political leaders, making institutionalization of success stories a difficult task. Moreover, given the fact that success stories are often implemented under very special deliberately (if not artificially) designed conditions, their multiplicative effects, or trigger effects (Roll, 2014c)—i.e., the extension of success stories to other projects, organizations, sectors, or regions—are often problematic. Due to these constraints, some success stories became short-lived and their returns diminished over time: they not only failed to improve conditions of bad governance but in fact reinforced its status quo. These tendencies are

widespread in contemporary Russia and in its Soviet (if not pre-Soviet) past; they do not contradict the overall pattern of bad governance in the country and may even serve as inherent attributes of this politico-economic order (Gel'man, 2016, 2017b).

The structure of the paper is as follows. After presenting the case of one of the most well-known success stories in Russia, the Soviet space program, I discuss the role and impact of success stories under conditions of bad governance, and emphasize their constraints, which are related to the priorities of the political leadership, the incentives of policy entrepreneurs, and the mechanisms for managing top priority projects against the background of a shortage of resources. Further, I focus on the dilemmas of state policies under bad governance in Russia, and highlight the effects of diminishing returns of success stories due to these constraints. The prospects and implications of success stories for Russia's development are considered in the conclusion.

Introduction: “But We Are Making Rockets”

It is hard to find a more salient example of a developmental success story in post-World War II Soviet history than the space program with its exceptional achievements, such as the first Sputnik orbital launch (1957) and the first human mission in space, conducted by Yuri Gagarin (1961). This success story was greatly appreciated at the time, and is still perceived highly by Russians: according to a 2008 nationwide mass survey, it was rated as the second most important event in Russian history, after victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45 (Levada Center, 2008). Indeed, the advancements of the space program served as a profound demonstration of the technological progress of the Soviet Union, and contributed to an attractive domestic and international image of the country and its political leadership within the context of the Cold War. However, the success of the Soviet space program was short-lived: the major breakthrough of the 1950s–60s turned into a plateau in the 1970s–80s, its material and symbolic returns diminished over time, and subsequent events after the Soviet collapse contributed to Russia's recent shift toward the second echelon of the global space superpowers. What are the causes of this trajectory and why is the experience of the Soviet space program important for understanding the strong and weak sides of success stories in Russia, both in the Soviet and in post-Soviet periods?²

The success of the Soviet space program would have been impossible without the efforts of two key individuals. The chief designer Sergei Korolev (1907–1966) was not only an outstanding organizer

² This section makes extensive use of an overview of works of several Western authors: (Hendrickx, Vis, 2007; Ivanovich, 2008; McDougall, 1985; Oberg, 1981; Phelan, 2012; Siddiqui, 2000).

of science and technology, who effectively coordinated a huge number of individuals and organizations and brilliantly implemented quite a few technologically complex and innovative devices and solutions. He was also (if not above all) a very successful policy entrepreneur, who was able to persuade Nikita Khrushchev to make the space program as a whole and especially a human mission in space his personal top policy priority. Khrushchev, in turn, desperately needed success stories, especially in the early stages of his leadership when he was pursuing domestic and international legitimation, and took major risks, which proved to be justified in the case of the space program. Khrushchev was emotional and expansive but not a very competent leader, and he often advanced policy innovations which brought only limited success (as in case of the Virgin Lands agricultural program), and even trusted charlatans such as (in)famous Academician Trofim Lysenko. The implementation of the Soviet space program, and especially of human space missions, was a very expensive extension of the rocket segment of the arms race, and a possible defeat on this front vis-à-vis the United States (driven by differences in the resource endowment and relative economic weights of the two countries) could have proved very sensitive for the Soviets in many ways. However, Khrushchev accepted these risks and provided personal patronage to the space program, as well as top priority funding for human space missions, despite fierce resistance from the Soviet military. The outcome greatly exceeded the wildest dreams of both Korolev and his political patron Khrushchev. The Soviet Union won twice on the space front, as a result of the successful launch of Sputnik and especially Gagarin's orbital flight against the background of a belated start by their American rivals, who had lagged at the beginning of the space program and had been faced with numerous technical problems. The outstanding success of the early stages of the Soviet space program opened up new horizons for Korolev and his team: they received carte blanche for implementation of its new stages, of which the first and foremost was the human mission to the Moon, where the Soviet Union entered a competition with the US known as the "Moon race". As for Khrushchev, the symbolic benefits which he (and the Soviet Union as a whole) received because of the successes of the space program and its demonstrative effects, multiplied by domestic and international propaganda (Gerovitch, 2011) were highly visible, especially given the increasing scope of the numerous problems the Soviet leadership faced in the early 1960s. The symbolic benefits brought to the Soviets by Sputnik and Gagarin only partially compensated for the very high political and economic costs of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban missile crisis, the shooting of workers' protest rallies in Novocherkassk and need to buy grain from abroad (Gaidar, 2007). Even then, these benefits were short-term, and their positive effects were only temporary.

There are no "if" paths of alternative history, and we will never know how the Soviet-American Moon race might have gone had the Khrushchev-Korolev tandem's drive behind the Soviet space program

continued. However, the ousting of Khrushchev from the Soviet leadership in October 1964 became a turning point for his top priorities, including the Soviet space program. Soon after that, under pressure from military-industrial lobbyists, the plans for the space program were reviewed in favor of their military component, while costly human space missions lost their priority (Siddiqui, 2000). In fact, the Soviet Union left the Moon race well before the Apollo program in the US was implemented in a full-fledged way and before it reached its peak in July 1969 with man's first step on the Moon. The events that followed this departure, such as Korolev's premature death in January 1966, the chain of casualties during human space missions in April 1967 and in June 1971 (Ivanovich, 2008), and Gagarin's death in a plane crash in March 1968, contributed to the space program gradually losing the status of success story for the Soviet Union. On a symbolic level, the struggle for space leadership with the US was framed as a kind of draw, with the symbolic gesture of the joint Apollo-Soyuz space mission in July 1975. Yet, in military terms, the space rivalry with the US continued, and it became more and more of a heavy burden for the Soviets. However, in technological terms the Soviet Union was not able to demonstrate new major breakthroughs and put them into mass production: while the US successfully launched its new Space Shuttle program in 1981, the Soviet response, Buran, did not even reach the stage of human missions (Hendrickx, Vis, 2007).

In essence, up until the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet space program followed a pathway of improving those technological solutions, which had been proposed and/or implemented in Korolev's times. More importantly, the multiplicative effects of the Soviet space program remained limited: the major success story of the Soviet Union on the space front did not contribute to new major success stories in other fields, which would have a genuine strong impact on the country's development. The Soviet space program remained a somewhat isolated "pocket of efficiency" (Geddes, 1994; Roll, 2014a), and beyond this narrow field, its influence was relatively weak: no major contagion effects (Roll, 2014c) were observed—quite the opposite, bureaucratic ineffectiveness (Graham, 2013) became stronger and stronger over time against the background of the increasing crisis of the Soviet economy (Gaidar, 2007). The one-off high returns of the success story in space declined over time, and its previous achievements increasingly performed symbolic compensatory functions, something visible as early as 1964, the heyday of the Soviet space boom. At that time, the Soviet bard Yuri Vizbor in his "The Story of Technologist Petukhov" ("*Rasskaz tekhnologa Petukhova*") identified himself with Soviet technological and cultural achievements on behalf of the protagonist: "But we are making rockets... and also at the top of the world in the field of ballet" ("*zato my delaem rakety...*

a takzhe v oblasti baleta my vperedi planety vsej”). Yet the keyword in this claim is not “rockets”: it is “But” (“*zato*”).³

To summarize, one might argue that the Soviet space program followed a developmental trajectory which was typical for a number of other success stories in Russia and beyond: (1) top policy priorities of political leaders, who actively supported new projects and programs and offered full-scale patronage to policy entrepreneurs; (2) quick achievement of visible results because of the high concentration of resources, with a number of symbolic returns; (3) limited multiplicative effects; (4) change in policy priorities (sometimes because of changes of leaders and/or top managers of these projects and programs) and (5) subsequent loss of the status of success story. This trajectory was not only limited to the context of the Soviet experience of the 1950s–80s, as one may compare the Soviet space program with the more recent experience of the Skolkovo innovation center in the 2010s: Skolkovo went through the same stages but in a more rapid way and with much smaller effects. During the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev this project served as a major symbol of the widely advertised plan for Russia’s technological modernization, was at the center of the president’s attention, and was given priority funding by the state and business actors despite the great skepticism of some key stakeholders (Pynnoniemi, 2014). The project aimed to achieve a breakthrough for Russia in the field of high tech, and intended to build a new success story of international technological collaboration based on active involvement of global corporate and science leaders, ranging from Intel to MIT. However, the implementation of this project was limited in space (only a single suburban area near Moscow) and in time (only during Medvedev’s presidency) and oriented toward short-term public effects in the manner of a showcase, rather than toward long-term commercial benefits (Graham, 2013). It is no wonder that after 2012, when Medvedev lost his presidential status, the Skolkovo project stalled and lost its priority status, its funding declined as the Russian authorities no longer required major donations to Skolkovo from big business, and its initially planned role as a major driver of high technology and economic growth was nearly forgotten. Subsequent developments, such as the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West, the decline of the Russian economy and the devaluation of national currency, further weakened the already limited effects of the Skolkovo project. In 2013, the Russian law enforcement agencies launched a criminal investigation against the Skolkovo Foundation, accusing its top management of misuse of funds (Reiter, Golunov, 2015), while the Kremlin’s preferences in the field of high tech shifted to yet another pet project, namely the “Innovation Valley” of Moscow State University, which was

³ A half-century after Vizbor, in 2014 the keyword “but” performed the same compensatory function after the Russian annexation of Crimea – “But Crimea is ours!” (“*Zato Krym nash!*”).

conducted in collaboration with the Innopraktika Foundation, led by Katerina Tikhonova, allegedly the daughter of Vladimir Putin. This foundation has received major contracts from other large state companies and agencies but its activities remain highly non-transparent, with little by way of results visible as of yet. Some critics have observed that the replication of Skolkovo-type innovation projects in Moscow and other regions may be driven not by the goals of technological development but rather by intentions of diverting state funds into private pockets (Navalny, 2015). Although the decline of Skolkovo was much more rapid and dramatic than that of the Soviet space program, they represent typologically similar phenomena.

While analyses of “pockets of efficiency” as mechanisms of development conducted in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Geddes, 1994; Portes, Smith, 2012; Roll, 2014a) underlined the key role of their institutionalization and long-term impact, Russia’s success stories are largely short-term ventures, ones that face major difficulties in their institutionalization and especially impersonalization. Over time, these “success stories” tend to lose their initially high-profile positions, and undergo what Andrey Zaostrovsev termed “shitization” (Zaostrovsev, 2009)—a systematic decline in performance in the process of implementation, and subsequent decay. One should note, however, that this paper deals with real success stories, which are broadly understood here as achievements of outstanding over-performance of state-directed development programs and projects, highly visible nationally and/or internationally at least for a certain period.⁴ These success stories are meant to promote Russia’s development in various fields, but they are often implemented partially and inconsistently. This is why we have to understand why Russia’s success stories have not always reached their goals and have resulted in short-term achievements, and how the mechanisms of their implementation are related to the overall logic of the politico-economic order of bad governance in Russia (Gel’man, 2017b).

Actors, Institutions, Incentives, and Resources

The key ingredients of successful developmental projects and programs in the public sector in Russia and beyond are top priority support from the political leadership, effective efforts by policy entrepreneurs (ministers, governors, city mayors, university rectors, company managers, and the like), and the competent provision of these projects with material, financial, and personnel resources.

⁴ Yet, the paper is not concerned with various substitutes of real successes, such as Potemkin village-like fake demonstrative projects, or numerous examples of fraud (such as the “cotton affair” in the late Soviet Uzbekistan, doping scandals in sports, and the like).

However, all of these components often bring contradictory results. The incentives for both the political leadership and policy entrepreneurs are mixed at best, and resources, even if their concentration is high enough to achieve some success stories, are insufficient for subsequent multiplicative effects and further dissemination of best practices.

The political leadership under conditions of bad governance is interested in success stories for two major reasons. First, as stated above, some policy achievements help to legitimize the political status quo: despite the well-known argument that bad policy is almost always good politics (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, 2011), many political leaders are sincerely interested in the economic growth and development of their respective countries, and Russia is not an exception. Second, even though rent-seeking is the major goal and substantive purpose of state governance in Russia and some other post-Soviet countries (Gel'man, 2016: 461), this fact does not prevent leaders and elites from pursuing developmental goals, which may also contribute to rent-seeking. A number of state-led projects and programs accompanied by large-scale embezzlement of funds (such as the 2014 Sochi Olympics) may illustrate this combination of rent-seeking and developmental goals. And even these projects are not limited to rent-seeking, and have also brought some returns in terms of development, although these returns are much smaller because of the high costs imposed by corruption. Similarly to the political leaders' demand for successful technocratic managers, who have to provide effective management in key sectors of the economy and finance (Gel'man, 2018), said leaders also need policy entrepreneurs, who are capable not only of routine implementation of top-down directives but also of successful advancement of their own initiatives. Pet projects and programs, directly supported by political leaders, become the main source of a number of success stories paving the way for investment of major resources (both public and private) into these ventures and opening up possibilities for special state regulation of given projects and programs well beyond the general practices and routines of decision-making. Such rules of the game were typical both for the Soviet space program and the Skolkovo project. The conditions of informal deals between patrons (political leaders) and their clients (policy entrepreneurs) imply top priority resource endowment and *carte blanche* for policy entrepreneurs on virtually all initiatives in their respective fields in exchange for promises of achievement of quick and highly visible successes. However, the list of such top priorities of given political leaders is limited practically by definition, and this is why policy entrepreneurs are forced to compete with each other for scarce resources and for meaningful attention from political leaders. Moreover, a change in the leaders' policy priorities (let alone a change in leaders themselves) threatens to put an end to projects and programs (as happened with the Skolkovo project) or at least put a large question mark over success stories (as happened with the Soviet space program).

One of the central problems of the politico-economic order of bad governance in Russia is the lack of incentives for long-term development among political leaders. Their time horizon is limited by the terms and conditions of personalist rule and by the risk of loss of power, while the chances for dynastic succession are low (Brownlee, 2007). Thus, political leaders tend to behave, in Olson's terms, as "roving" rather than "stationary" bandits (Olson, 1993). This is why they choose those policy priorities, which may bring quick and visible returns, accompanied by a number of demonstrative effects, even at the expense of achieving of long-term strategic goals. This approach may contribute to policy successes in some fields but decreases the chances of successful implementation of policy changes in other areas. The experience of Russia's policy reforms in the 2000s (Gel'man, Starodubtsev, 2016) and subsequent implementation of strategic policy programs in the 2010s (Dmitriev et al., 2016) suggests that while the incentives of political leaders are oriented toward short-term successes, these incentives also affect policy entrepreneurs.

Top managers and major implementers of key state projects and programs, even if they are willing and able to improve performance in their respective fields, are not sure that their intentions will be implemented given frequent personnel replacements, the ever-changing formal and informal rules of the game, and the shifting priorities of the political leadership. These circumstances also determine the incentives for would-be policy entrepreneurs. At best, they invest major efforts into short-term projects with limited reach at the expense of long-term outcomes and consequences, or, in the worst case, they prefer personal enrichment over the developmental success of their sectors, organizations, or territories. According to Geddes, "the central problem for authoritarian regimes is the creation of an appropriate set of incentives to shape behavior of their own officials" (Geddes, 1994: 193), and under these conditions it remains unresolved as the politico-economic order of bad governance in Russia places a large question mark over the incentives. Unlike Russia, present-day China provides certain incentives for policy entrepreneurship among top- and mid-level bureaucrats. Such incentives are contributed to by the institutional systems for career advancement of the Communist Party's regional leadership on the basis of performance evaluation, including inter-regional mobility of personnel and such major prizes as chances of getting jobs in the Central Committee. Chinese officials have to put effort into the successful socio-economic development of their territories, while their fierce internal competition for career advancement diminishes the risks of systematic misreporting and fraud given the mutual policing among bureaucrats (Rochlitz et al., 2015). For Russia's regional leaders, however, the incentives are rather different—as Ora John Reuter and Graeme Robertson convincingly demonstrated, Russia's governors more often lose their jobs for poor political performance and failure to deliver votes than for poor economic performance in terms of development of their areas. To put it bluntly, if a Chinese regional boss may achieve success by building new roads

and hospitals and combatting air pollution, his Russian counterpart has to inflate voter turnout and crack down on regional protests. These differences in incentives aggravate rent-seeking behavior in Russia, and are hardly conducive to development; in a sense, they also underline the inefficiency of electoral authoritarianism in Russia compared to its hegemonic version in China.

It is no wonder that incentives for policy entrepreneurship in Russia are so heavily distorted, and not only due to insufficient positive incentives for improving policy performance and limited chances for upward career mobility in the public sector. The effects of negative incentives, driven by the set of formal and informal rules of the game and practices of their enforcement within the framework of the “overregulated state” (Paneyakh, 2013) in Russia, are even more important in this respect. The combination of high density and low quality of state regulation in various sectors and policy fields on the one hand, and of its arbitrary and selective enforcement by the state apparatus on the other, is hardly conducive to policy entrepreneurship. The Russian state reasonably expects that without top-down pressure the lower layers of the governing hierarchy (known as the “power vertical”) will not invest enough effort for effective implementation of state policies. This is why the state delegates wide-ranging and sweeping powers to regulatory agencies responsible for monitoring and auditing any organization in various sectors, and has established multiple indicators for reporting, and severe sanctions for non-compliance, at all levels of governance (Gel'man, 2016). In other words, instead of involving regulatory agencies in the activities of both state-led and private organizations only in cases of extraordinary misconduct (the “fire alarm” model), the Russian state has imposed comprehensive monitoring and tight control over all organizations (the “police patrol” model) (McCubbins, Schwartz, 1984). To some extent, such an approach results from an over-reaction by the political leadership to rent-seeking behavior of officials in the state apparatus and public sector. Its excessive nature contributes to a major rise in agency costs, distorted practices of oversight and monitoring among various agencies, and the increasing dysfunctionality of courts, police, and other state organizations (Volkov et al., 2013; Paneyakh, 2014). These practices of the “overregulated state” provide incentives for overproduction of reports in many state and private organizations, and response to possible attacks from state agencies has even changed from the means to the goal of their activities. The “overregulated state” stimulates top managers at all layers of the power vertical not to policy entrepreneurship and improvement of performance in their fields, but rather to risk aversion and avoidance of possible punishment for any formal or informal violations of rules, which are highly likely in the case of development-oriented initiatives. This is why top managers do not aim to establish new “pockets of efficiency” without strong support and the patronage of the political leadership. The problem is that the number of beneficiaries of patronage is limited by its very nature, and the pool of potentially successful policy entrepreneurs is shrinking over time. Moreover, patronage is a necessary

condition of success stories but it is far from being sufficient. For example, the significant development of a major Russian bank, Sberbank, which greatly improved the quality of its service and performance, was a side effect of the appointment of German Gref, a close ally and trusted expert of Vladimir Putin, as its CEO (Karasyuk, 2013). At the same time, another close ally of Putin, Vladimir Yakunin, upon being appointed as CEO of another major Russian company, Russian Railways, changed the company strategy and turned it into a major channel for rent extraction (“Russia’s Greatest Rent Machine”) (Khusainov, 2015; Gel’man, 2016). The strengthening of the hierarchy of the power vertical has contributed to the fact that the investment of resources into the projects lobbied for by a number of top managers has brought insufficient returns and/or resulted in massive misuse of funds. As a result, these tendencies make the power vertical even more stable and rigid at the expense of developmental goals.

Finally, the shortage of material, financial, and personnel resources available for top managers of state-directed projects and programs remains a major barrier to the achievement of new success stories. Russia was and still is a second-order country in terms of its degree of socio-economic development, and its stated intentions to become a global space leader (in the case of the Soviet space program) or a leading center of high tech (in the case of Skolkovo) were hardly feasible in a long-term perspective. Top managers, in turn, respond to these constraints by using overconcentration of resources. The costs of success stories are overly high, the implementation of top priority projects requires mobilization of almost all available specialists, and meeting deadlines turns into a sequence of extremely hasty activities, often at the expense of quality of implementation. Despite the high costs, over-concentration of resources may sometimes help achieve one-off successes, but the problems stated above can become aggravated over time. Successes, once achieved through over-concentration of resources, become more difficult to maintain, especially given the competition between projects within the country as well as in the international arena (as in fact happened with the Soviet space program). In essence, over-concentration of resources bleeds other projects and programs, which lack priority status. Multiplicative effects become even less feasible, and negative incentives for outsiders, who now have no chance to produce success stories, become even stronger. As a result, the success of the few causes the failures of the many: the over-concentration of resources leads to draining of the pool of potential targets for dissemination of best practices beyond “pockets of efficiency”.

To summarize, one might argue that success stories in Russia (and a number of other countries) face numerous barriers, both structural ones caused by a shortage of resources and institutional ones related to agency-driven incentives under conditions of bad governance. Nevertheless, in cases where there is a winning combination of (1) the policy priorities of political leaders and their patronage and

(2) strong and effective policy entrepreneurs, who are able to achieve quick and visible performance of their projects and programs, even these institutions and incentives may contribute to certain success stories despite unfavorable conditions. Yet the same institutions and incentives may close the path to multiplicative effects of success stories and dissemination of their best practices beyond narrow fields. Rather, as the experience of both the Soviet space program and the Skolkovo project suggests, success stories may lose their excellence over time and no longer maintain their special status. The Russian state and its top officials create with their own hands the same syndrome of unfavorable conditions for implementation of top priority projects and programs, which was outlined by Loren Graham in his analysis of barriers to innovation in Russian businesses (Graham, 2013)—excessive costs of projects, very inefficient state regulations, and weak potential for multiplicative effects. This is why many success stories in Russia are not exceptions which still conform to the overall rules of bad governance, but rather an integral part of this politico-economic order. The high achievements of success stories do not only legitimate political leaders and their patronage. Their demonstrative effects and compensatory functions also legitimate the mechanisms of these achievements against the background of the numerous pathologies and dysfunctionality of the Russian state. However, one should not consider success stories to be only short-term initiatives by political leaders which have negligible impact on the development of the country and/or sectors of its economy and territories.

The Anatomy of Success: Tatarstan, the Higher School of Economics, and Others

A number of factors which have contributed to the achievement of certain success stories in Russia are not particularly country-specific, both within the context of post-Communist transformations (Johnson, 2016) and in other parts of the globe (Geddes, 1994; Roll, 2014a, 2014c). Overall, effective policy entrepreneurs, thanks to the patronage of the political leadership, are able to maintain organizational autonomy of their projects, programs, organizations, or territories, and, due to quick achievement of positive outcomes, attract more resources and successfully invest them into new successes. These actions lead to increasing returns and successful maintenance of organizational autonomy, and further institutionalization and organizational continuity upon changes in top managers and the political leadership. However, in Russia's case, this recipe works imperfectly given the contradictory features of authoritarianism and bad governance, and this is why some success stories should be analyzed with a number of reservations.

The case of Tatarstan is typical in this respect. The region demonstrated rapid and efficient socio-economic development and effective implementation of innovative projects and programs in the 2000s and continued these tendencies in the 2010s despite an overall slowdown nationwide

(Yakovlev et al., 2017). Scholars from the Higher School of Economics, who offered a detailed analysis of Tatarstan's success story, focused on effective consolidation of elites in the region around the reform-oriented and development-minded political leaders of the republic (Mintimer Shaimiev and his successor Rustam Minnikhanov), a high degree of republican autonomy, and careful maintenance of relationships with the federal center. They argued that due to these factors, the high socio-economic potential of the republic was effectively used for development, and the negative effects of bad governance were diminished. Republican control over Tatarstan's major assets was acquired during the process of bargaining with the federal center in the 1990s. At the same time, the monopolistic political control of the republican leadership was undeniable. The republican elites, consolidated on an ethnic basis, built a model of "crony capitalism", which implies mutual commitments between authorities and big business, while outside economic agents had limited access to republican markets. Closed elite networks have limited the pernicious consequences of corruption, unlike in the regions, which have demonstrated open intra-elite conflicts (Sharafutdinova, 2011), while the orientation of republican leaders toward development beyond rent-seeking was rewarded by the federal center after the recentralization of the Russian state in the 2000s. To some extent, Tatarstan was able to exchange its previous special status for priority federal funding of numerous projects and programs in the republic. Their successful implementation laid down foundations for new initiatives, such as the creation of the Alabuga special economic zone, the most efficient project of its kind: by early 2017, it represented 64% of the total earnings, 37% of the tax returns and more than half of the investments of the twenty-four special economic zones in Russia (Yakovlev et al., 2017: 19–20). In the wake of recentralization, Tatarstan elites were able to retain their control over key assets (unlike in other resource-rich republics) (Sharafutdinova, 2010, 2015), and retain their informal veto power over the appointment of federal officials in Tatarstan (Yakovlev et al., 2017: 13–14). Finally, the shift of republican leadership from Shaimiev to Minnikhanov in 2010 appears to have demonstrated the continuity of the Tatarstan model as a relatively successful trajectory of gradual political changes in the region; in this respect, scholars draw some parallels with the rapid catch-up growth achieved by some authoritarian countries in South-East Asia (ibid.: 44).

This combination of factors in Tatarstan's success story was unique, with no possibility of its diffusion beyond the republic. In addition, the Tatarstan model faces numerous deficiencies: a rigid "power vertical" within the republic and the consolidated elites' aspiration to comprehensive control of the economy and society have created major barriers to further development (ibid.: 52–53). Against the background of increasing economic problems in Russia, the rejection of the strategy of economic growth and development as nation-wide policy priorities, and numerous other negative trends, the special status Tatarstan obtained in the 1990s has been gradually revisited. In 2017, the federal center

openly rejected the idea of extending the bilateral treaty on delineation of competences between Moscow and Kazan, first signed in 1994. Later on, under pressure from the federal center, all ethnic republics, including Tatarstan, were forced to abolish mandatory study of the Tatar language (Deputaty, 2017). These moves were largely perceived not only as an attack on the ethnic foundations of Tatarstan's special status, but also as a first step toward seizing its assets. Tatar ethnic intellectuals released a special manifesto addressed to the republican leadership in defense of the Tatar language, and warned that “when interested parties come to grab Tatneft, TAIF, or certain top-level personnel, nobody will support you” (Obrashchenie, 2017). Nevertheless, republican leaders are afraid to resist the pressure from the federal center, and it is most probable that the further decline of republican autonomy, takeover of Tatarstan economic assets, and reconfiguration of ruling elites is merely a matter of time. At the very least, the odds that Tatarstan's success story will continue are questionable, given the decline in political patronage and the revision of policy priorities—the organizational autonomy of Tatarstan's leaders and the institutionalization of its success story are uncertain, to put it mildly. And even a possible compromise with powerful federal political and economic actors will impose major limits on how far its returns can increase.

Another example of systematic construction of a success story in post-Soviet Russia is the experience of the Higher School of Economics (HSE), which received the status of National Research University in 2009.⁵ The university was established from zero in November 1992, when Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar signed a decree on the creation of a new economic training center for personnel working under the conditions of a market economy. The founding (and as of yet, the only) rector, Yaroslav Kuzminov, established the core of the HSE's team in relatively short order, and attracted almost all the prominent market-oriented economic experts as well as many officials from the government (Istoriya, 2017). The figure of Evgeny Yasin, an authoritative economist of the older generation who served as Minister of Economy in Russia and later took the post of academic director of the HSE (Kolesnikov, Yasin, 2014), was indicative of this recruitment pattern. In 1999–2000 Kuzminov and other representatives of the HSE were at the center of the development of the “Strategy 2010” program of socio-economic reforms adopted by the Russian government, and subsequently the informal status of the HSE was elevated to a great degree. It became the major “brain trust” of liberal reformers (Benediktov, 2010), and policy-oriented projects, ordered by the government and other state agencies, became a visible part of the HSE's activities and important sources of its revenue (Nicol'skaya, 2015). Under the influence of the HSE, a number of policy innovations were launched in various fields, such as the implementation of the Unified State Exam, the nation-wide mechanism

⁵ Hereafter, I use materials from the HSE official website, www.hse.ru.

of grading school graduates, also used for entrance exams in state universities (Starodubtsev, 2017b). Kuzminov became a prominent public figure, often considered a prospective candidate for various posts in the government, but kept his job at the HSE; however, in 2014 he was elected to the Moscow City legislative assembly, and in 2015 became a co-chair of the Moscow branch of United People's Front, a major pro-Putin organization. Kuzminov's wife, Elvira Nabiullina, served as Minister of Economic Development and then as a chair of the Central Bank of Russia; in other words, their personal union was intertwined with top-level political connections. Kuzminov was also at the center of a network of economic experts closely linked to the Russian government and labeled "systemic liberals". He was the co-director of development of a new governmental program, "Strategy 2020" (Strategiya, 2012) and actively participated in preparing a number of Putin's decrees on issues of socio-economic development. At the same time, top state officials served as the HSE's trustees, regularly gave talks at its annual conferences, and supported this organization in various forms, ranging from state contracts to new office buildings. While the HSE initiated a number of state-directed projects and programs, it also became one of their major beneficiaries, directly or indirectly. In fact, Kuzminov turned out to be a very successful policy entrepreneur: he invested resources effectively into the market advancement of the HSE and attracted various new sources for development of the organization, including tuition fees and contracts from business and from the state. In the 2000s, the HSE grew extensively, took over a number of other educational establishments, expanded its regional campuses in St Petersburg, Perm, and Nizhny Novgorod, and incorporated a number of buildings in Moscow and later on in St Petersburg. From its beginnings as a small specialized training program in economics, it became one of Russia's largest universities (Istoriya, 2017): its scholarly profile went beyond social sciences and humanities and included math and computer science. These achievements contributed to a great increase in its international visibility,⁶ which attracted several international academic "stars" as heads of its projects and laboratories (who stated their HSE affiliation in their academic publications) and resulted in effective incentives for its lecturers and researchers. These incentives included juicy carrots such as individual bonuses for leading international publications and other achievements and HSE internal grants, and hard sticks such as short-term contracts, which allowed university managers to easily replace inefficient and/or undesired personnel. This personnel policy enabled the HSE to attract both leading scholars and prospective young researchers who had previously worked in other institutions in Russia and abroad. Even its academic critics recognized its achievements (Oleinik, 2011). To summarize, a

⁶ See the information on the HSE website at <https://strategyunits.hse.ru/news/keywords/81259457/> (access July 24, 2018).

high degree of autonomy, effective organizational leadership, and skillful patronage became the major pillars of the HSE's success story.

Against the background of a worsening domestic and international political and economic climate in Russia, especially after 2014, the success story of the university, which is based on principles of international integration, academic freedom, and self-governance, has faced increasing challenges. HSE has followed a “too big to fail” strategy throughout its extensive growth as an organization, which has reduced some of the risks. However, the political risks for a “liberal” university (Benediktov, 2010) have remained very high. Numerous critics of the authorities among HSE scholars have been motivated to self-censorship or at least to avoid mentioning HSE affiliation in their public rhetoric. In addition, the HSE success story was to a great degree related to Kuzminov's personal performance (Nikol'skaya, 2015), and given the increasing challenges and declining time horizon for further planning, the chances of the institutionalization and impersonalization of this success story have diminished over time. Even though any conclusions about this success story would be premature, one must admit that in the HSE's case, its success was exceptional and has contributed only to a limited multiplicative effect on other higher education establishments in Russia, and the state resources, which the HSE has (deservedly) attracted for its development, have not been received by other state universities. But does this always mean that the handful of success stories under bad governance are doomed to remain isolated islands of high-quality development amid a sea of mediocrity, while the top managers of other state-directed projects and programs are forced to keep “muddling through”?

The “5-100” Project: Why Successes are Rare

To some extent, the project of multiplication of success stories and dissemination of best practices in higher education, as attempted by the Russian authorities in the 2010s, helps understand why success stories are so rare in Russia and beyond. The “5-100” state project aimed to promote five Russian universities into the top 100 of the global rankings of higher education organizations by 2020.⁷ This project was approved by the president and government of Russia; it involved a number of Russian state universities, as selected by a special commission, receiving state subsidies for the purpose of their development, which could then help in their advancement in international rankings. The major

⁷ The official title is “The project of increasing competitiveness of leading Russian universities among leading global scientific-educational centers”. Hereafter, I use materials from the official website of the project, [/www.5top100.ru](http://www.5top100.ru) (accessed July 24, 2018).

driver of the project was the Ministry of Education and Science, launched in 2012 after Putin's presidential decree and officially approved in 2013, and led by Dmitry Livanov, an active supporter of reform of science and education in Russia and especially of internationalization of Russian scholarship (Guriev, Livanov, Severinov, 2009). The "5-100" project also generated ideas, which were included in the government's "Strategy 2020" program, developed by Kuzminov, and, in turn, aimed to disseminate the best practices of the HSE (Strategiya, 2012). This direction was chosen as a top policy priority of Russia's political leadership because of a winning combination of several factors. First, at that moment Russia's leaders were still pursuing a strategy of "modernization" (Gel'man, 2017a) which included successful growth and development as an objective of governing the country (at least, at the level of rhetoric), and advancement of higher education fit these goals. Second, the "5-100" project was not invented out of the blue but served as a logical extension of the establishment of federal and national research universities in Russia in the 2000s, which were considered "growth poles" in the higher education sector.⁸ Third, the possible elevation of Russian universities to the heights of global rankings could have visible demonstrative effects and could perform the function of conspicuous consumption of symbolic goods by the Russian leadership. It could also perform compensatory functions, outweighing the major defects of Russian higher education, which range from widespread corruption to poor quality of university governance and low quality of research and teaching (Disseropediya, 2018; Sokolov, Volokhonskii, 2013; Sokolov, Titaev, 2013; Golunov, 2014).

The start of the "5-100" project was very promising. The Russian state assigned 57 billion rubles for its implementation in 2013–2017, and added slightly more funds later on. The Ministry of Education and Science, with the help of an international board, selected 21 state universities for participation in the project, including the HSE and the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys (Livanov had served as rector of this institution before taking his ministerial post). All these universities presented roadmaps for their implementation of the "5-100" project, which involved a serious rise in the proportion of international students and scholars, a major increase in the quantity and quality of academic publications (particularly in international scholarly outlets), and a number of other steps. However, two leading institutions, namely the Moscow State and St Petersburg State Universities, were deliberately excluded from the project. The formal argument was related to the fact that these universities already occupied top positions in global rankings, but this move also made it possible to exclude their influential rectors from involvement in the venture (which was especially true in case

⁸ Experts differ in their assessments of the motives, mechanisms, and outcomes of these actions (Forrat, 2016a, 2016b; Chirikov, 2016).

of Viktor Sadovnichiy, a notoriously isolationist rector of Moscow State University). Putin's patronage of the project enabled it to maintain its budget (relatively high by Russia's standards), despite cuts in some of the ministry's expenditures at the end of 2014. However, the advancement of Russian universities in global rankings soon faced major challenges.

First and foremost, the "5-100" project was too short-term in terms of its time horizon: it was measured in years rather than in decades, which were what it took for Chinese universities, for example, to achieve similar goals. But such a planning horizon was unrealistic for Russia, because the political leadership does not consider potential benefits in such a distant future. The fact that the achievement of the project's goals by 2020 was perceived as impossible by top managers and participants in the project greatly affected all incentives—the community of leaders of Russian higher education was interested not in achieving the final results but in demonstrating partial and temporary advancements at the level of interim reporting. The scope of funding of the "5-100" project was also insufficient for its ambitious goals, especially because its resources were spread among more than 20 recipient universities. Finally, the mechanism for implementation of the project and the requirements imposed on universities by the Russian state did not involve irreversible structural and institutional changes to university governance, let alone an increase in their organizational autonomy aimed at successful long-term development of these institutions after the end of the project. It is no wonder that some of the universities included in the "5-100" project perceived it as a one-off massive inflow of state funds, a kind of major gift, which should be met with appropriate reporting on publications and internationalization and nothing more.

In addition to these problems, the project faced challenges of a different kind. After 2014, the policy priorities of Russia's political leadership shifted from developmental goals to geopolitical adventures. The project, aimed at international integration of Russian higher education, poorly fit these new priorities. In 2016, Livanov, the major driver of the "5-100" project, was fired from his ministerial post, and his successor Olga Vasil'eva was mostly isolationist, had limited bureaucratic influence, and demonstrated little interest in her predecessor's initiatives. Finally, cuts to the project's funding became nearly unavoidable by the end of 2017, when a proposal to make these cuts was turned down at the very last moment by the deputy prime minister, Olga Golodets (Lapina, 2017). Overall, by early 2018 the success of the "5-100" project was mixed at best: advancement of the Russian universities in global rankings was visible but insufficient to achieve the project's goals, although the HSE and some other institutions greatly improved their positions in rankings for several disciplines. The prospects for implementation of this project beyond 2020 look rather questionable. While one should not deny the major progress made by some Russian institutions, especially with regard to internationalization and publications, as well as the emergence of some university-driven initiatives

beyond the HSE,⁹ these achievements have not resulted in qualitative changes to the landscape of Russian higher education (at least, as of yet) and have not given rise to a cumulative effect of successful development of the sector. None of the universities involved have demonstrated achievement comparable with that of the HSE, and its best practices have been disseminated only with significant difficulties.

The experience of “5-100” has demonstrated the problems with transferring success stories beyond their initial sites. The dissemination of best practices is one of the instances of policy diffusion which is aimed at institutional isomorphism, “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (Powell, Di Maggio, 1983: 149). Scholars have outlined three types of diffusions, which lead to this outcome, namely coercive, mimetic, and normative. The coercive diffusion, promoted by the state, has the strongest effect on the behavior of individuals and organizations, especially in authoritarian settings. Yet coercion is hardly an effective means of making success stories, especially when negative incentives are weak (there are no repressions in Russia for inefficient top managers in the public sector even in cases of total failure), and its long-term positive incentives are questionable. Mimetic diffusion, when the top leadership chooses role models from a menu of possible options, is also problematic, given the low organizational autonomy of state-led projects and programs. Finally, normative diffusion emanates from sources that are perceived to be “legitimate and reputable” (ibid.: 153). These sources of isomorphism are complementary, but under conditions of bad governance, none of them contribute appropriately to dissemination of best practices. The normative sources and role models for top managers are not successful policy entrepreneurs but rather successful rent-seekers: in the public sector, they dream of behaving like Yakunin rather than like Gref. Without top-down pressure, the dissemination of best practices by top managers of companies and organizations may result in their prosecution by the “overregulated state”, especially if they achieve success. Furthermore, coercive diffusion rarely coincides with resource endowment, which is necessary for the achievement of success stories and their maintenance, and this is why these pressures may lead to short-term campaigns or attenuate the best practices, which may result in not-so-best consequences. Moreover, state-led projects and programs, which lose priority status and/or funding, become vulnerable to the threat of normative and mimetic diffusion from role models of rent-seeking, as well as passive adjustment to ever-changing state regulations and production of meaningless reporting. In such

⁹ The School of Advanced Studies in Tyumen State University may be perceived as one such venture in the field of social sciences and humanities; see <https://sas.utmn.ru/ru/>.

situations, coercive diffusion from the state toward former (or failed) success stories, alongside personnel reshuffling, may contribute to their “shitization” and make it irreversible.

This skeptical account does not mean that sustainable success stories and/or dissemination of best practices in the public sector in Russia are impossible or doomed to be isolated exceptions, which do not meaningfully affect the overall dismal picture. But one should reconsider the overall role of success stories in Russia’s development, not only “here and now” but in a longer-term perspective.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: On the Use and Abuse of Success Stories

The (in)famous argument that Russia is a “normal country” (Shleifer, Treisman, 2004) has been objected to on various grounds. Among them, the claim widely used in public discussions concerns Russia’s numerous global achievements in different fields ranging from arts to sports. Yet, if one were to consider “normality” as a statistical rather than a substantive phenomenon, then the average scores would not take any outliers into account. Similarly to a school class, where the only A-student will barely affect overall grades given a majority of C-students, the extraordinary achievements of certain success stories do not make the country great against the background of modest progress in other fields. Moreover, most of these great successes of Russia were achieved in the past, and they cannot serve as a free pass once and forever. Still, constant references to success stories, especially in the public discourse on Russia, to a certain degree tend to smooth out overall discontent with the country’s mediocre performance and drive discussions on its causes and effects onto the periphery of the attention of elites and masses alike. This is why the overemphasizing of success stories at the expense of interest in the political, economic, and social environment beyond them has contributed to the continuity of bad governance and even legitimated this politico-economic order. In fact, certain success stories were achieved not because of the overall conditions of bad governance but because these projects and programs were implemented under special conditions. The compensatory functions of some success stories in Russia and beyond may be also considered as manifestations of mediocrity syndrome in the country (Gel’man, 2013).

In fact, Russia, an average country of the twenty-first century, has most probably exhausted the potential of its infrastructural and personnel resources for success stories on the global scale comparable with those of the Soviet space program. It is highly likely that Russia’s current and possibly future success stories are doomed to be limited to certain niches. But insofar as the institutions and incentives that emerged in the Soviet and in post-Soviet periods encouraged high demand for success stories among political leaders and society at large, we might expect a recurrent tendency of state-led programs and projects aimed at such achievements. At best, these success stories

can bring only partial and temporary successes, and at worst, they may come to naught (as happened with Skolkovo) or even lead to the opposite result, as with the Sochi Olympics and their numerous doping scandals (Medvedev, 2017).

However, possible attempts to diminish the pernicious effects of bad governance, if and when they occur in Russia, may contribute to a decline in purposeful state sponsorship of success stories for a number of reasons, including a shortage of the infrastructural and personnel resources which are necessary for achievements of this kind. The question is to what extent this shift in use of resources will enable the Russian authorities to change the very paradigm of development and switch from an orientation toward a small number of extraordinary and highly visible achievements to the improvement of quality of socio-economic development. Such a move may lay foundations not for separate success stories with weak multiplicative effects at the expense of everything else, but for gradual advancement of the country toward better performance. The lack of change in the paradigm of development increases the risk that Russia's success stories in the twenty-first century will remain matters of the past—in all likelihood, forever.

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