When You Take Up the Innovation Business, You Must Always Think a Few Steps Ahead

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What are the latest developments in the innovative policy worldwide?

Before taking up the subject of innovation policy, I think we should get a good grasp of the relationship existing between innovations and regular even-paced development of any country. If we fail to understand it, this way or another we will always end up in a void. There is a hypothesis which I think is quite convincing. Suppose we take up a development model and we live in the 19th century. Then we would face no problems whatsoever. We would know that development is linear, that all countries resemble long distance runners: some lead the race, some lag behind, some might shove another aside, even a scuffle might flare up, but they all run in one direction. Hence, the well-known theory of formations and the idea of progress.

Modern science drifted away from the outlook on development as a linear and progressive process. Differing views are expressed, including that the development can follow the «three steps ahead, two steps back» or «one step back» patterns. A complete rollback and degradation may well become a reality; there may be side steps or a great leap forward followed by complete failure. In other words, there is a great multitude of different models. Effectively, the progressive development is not a guarantee, and this is the first thought that I would like to emphasize. If any state claims to be something more than just a small neutral country, like a state with the past and the future with a more important role in international politics and global economy, it must go ahead and make a serious effort in choosing an appropriate model for future development. That's point number one.

Now let's move to point number two. Suppose a state decided to stage an across-the-board breakthrough. Let's dub it modernization, although, of course, it is a far cry from the modernization theory of the 1960-70's. The issue at hand today is slightly different. We still use the term, but its meaning has changed. If a state decides to join the advanced vanguard countries, it should realize that it should choose such reference points, which will secure an innovative breakthrough and, probably, its presence in this vanguard.

The most important thing in this case is how these innovative programs are perceived by society. We can bring together gifted scientists, remarkable government officials and top-notch experts. They will think of a way to implement this breakthrough using innovations, but such innovations will lack the support of the society, or even worse, will be rejected by it. There is no end to such examples.

Therefore, the issue is not only about the innovation policy. The question is that this innovation policy should cover not only technical issues and ways to allocate money. There is need to understand how this innovation policy can be built based on the current social framework. Everyone criticizes it today. However, criticism is inconsequential in this case; most importantly, we should understand mechanisms underlying the societal evolution.

In other words, the question is can you make a society accept an innovation as something natural and then carry it forward? One can come up with a model, establish institutions, allocate major funds, start developing certain areas, but none of them will have anything to do with existing infrastructure whatsoever. How do you put them together? As a matter of fact, the innovation policy in Russia has no solution for that. This issue needs to be pondered. And it should be pondered by public opinion, not just decision makers. If we refer to the countries that managed to implement such innovative breakthroughs, such as Singapore, Malaysia, India, Japan, South Korea, or Israel, we’ll see that normally, in addition to outstanding programs, serious funding, enlistment of renowned specialists, both domestic and foreign, all of them backed their respective breakthroughs with putting in place an entire infrastructural system. What do I include in infrastructure? First off, I include the availability of certain traditions in a given society, such as scientific, technical and even spiritual. I even include attitude toward success, implementation practices and values maintained by a given society. If there is a discord between innovation and such infrastructure, then the innovation will go belly up very soon and will just get rejected as another fleeting idea. There’s need for something that would turn innovation into a tradition, when innovation itself becomes a tradition in the given society.
This can be done in two ways. The first one is when existing traditions are displaced and coincident ways are sought for. What did the Japanese do? Let's take, for example, Meiji Revolution. At that point in time Japan was a society with the highest level of education and literacy. On top of that, there was a matching body of Japanese traditions, such as life-time employment, work ethics and a series of other parameters that facilitated modernization. Same thing occurred in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia. This briefly describes the first way.

The second way has innovations implemented top down. We love this option a lot. Speaking of which, I enjoyed the fact that the participants, including foreign ones, discussed it again and again in Yaroslavl. I’m talking about the Peter the Great’s reforms and reforms dating back to late 19th – early 20th century associated with Vitte. Put differently, those were the breakthroughs in our history when a certain type was forced into application and then artificially spliced up with what was available. Fundamentally, schools and universities create new citizens. Not only they transmit culture and values, but also the have this “innovation gene” and make people more open minded. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. It works with the support of a very potent educational system. Therefore, if we speak of Skolkovo, I have a very good feeling about it. That’s exactly the way it started everywhere. Never ever the innovation programs have been spread thin across vast territories of a country. There have always been vanguard outposts. We will give you just one case in point. It’s very comforting to know that MGIMO University ranks first and MFTI University comes second in the Forbes ratings. From the very beginning there was an innovation approach to education at MGIMO, and the standards of education today as high as they used to be back then. At some point in time MFTI introduced the Cambridge education system, which churned out a series of brilliant Soviet physicists who not only weren’t inferior to their Western colleagues, but exceeded them in many ways. Therefore, there is need for both Skolkovo and a certain education model.

Here comes another interesting and very important contradiction. First off, Skolkovo doesn’t mean loss of interest in other already existing science cities. We are always facing the danger of getting carried away with a novelty and forgetting about and dumping everything else. We should think about a model whereby the existing science cities and research centers are tied in with Skolkovo, at least, when it’s possible. Only then things will fall in place. In addition to that, connections should be established with certain higher schools. I have no idea why they keep rejecting the idea of setting up a separate school for Skolkovo, but I believe that’d be the right thing to do.

Let me repeat it: Innovations should be based on the society infrastructure. Such backing might be there already, but it needs to be searched for. This issue cannot be resolved in one day. It calls for time to ponder, engage in public discussions and clear up the situation. Speaking of which, we have a very poor idea of what our society really is. Nobody has ever given it serious consideration. For example, let’s assume someone comes up with an invention, no matter what kind of invention. Do we have everything in place in order to instantly issue a patent and, taking it up a notch, instantly implement it into production? Are we capable of running an adequate ad campaign to build demand for such product? I don’t think so. When you take up the innovation business, you must always think a few steps ahead. The mere fact of declaring that nanotechnology is cool and we’ll get into it is not enough. Ask any person in the street why we need nanotechnologies, and they’ll fail to explain why. However, they do need to understand it. In order for people to understand, there must be a system supported by both major business entities and the government. There must be a host of popular science magazines similar to Znanie – Sila, Nauka i Zhizn, etc. Such magazines should be spread among the general audience. There’s also need for high school lessons and relevant courses at colleges. If we manage to establish the right atmosphere around this issue, things will start ticking.

If we speak about innovations per se or the feasibility of an innovative breakthrough in Russia, I believe it would make sense to take a look at the academic schools in Russia, latest developments at such schools that didn’t get any follow-through for some reason. There’s no point is blindly pursuing the latest faddish idea, as we’ll find ourselves always catching up with something. We need to take a thorough look and see if we have anything that we’ve put away and forgotten about, which might well constitute a 21st century breakthrough? I am positive that Russia has such things. However, this kind of job is best done by professionals. If it’s delegated to people who put together reports about completed research projects, the whole thing would end up in total failure. There are world class experts in every area of knowledge who are in a position to say what was developed and where exactly Russia can make a breakthrough today.

I don’t believe, either, that we can achieve concurrent fast modernization if we spread our resources thin across vast numbers of Russian enterprises. Therefore, I believe there must be certain single-point breakthroughs, which will tow everything else in their wake.

I have a very good feeling about the Global Political Forum in Yaroslavl, which was mentioned earlier. It was insanely interesting: A powerful shot of adrenaline, if you will. On my way there, I feared to become part of another pompous, ritualistic function, which I’ve my fair share of. I’m very pleased indeed that things turned out quite differently. I witnessed a serious conversation about very serious issues and, most importantly, conducted at the highest scientific level.

I attended three panels. I will not mention plenary meetings, the most interesting part of the Forum, but I’d like to emphasize that I was deeply impressed by two panels on modernization and on regional security. Almost each and every speech was a phenomenon and an event in itself.