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UNH and Franklin Pierce Scholars Witness a Building Boom in Russia

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EDITORS: The following op/ed on Russia's revolution was written by New Hampshire scholars on teaching exchange in Russia until May 25.

Russia is experiencing a building boom, and not just in Moscow. This explosion of construction and restoration projects indicates that Russia is emerging from a decade of political, economic, and cultural deconstruction and is beginning to rebuild. Observations of these projects suggest equally, however, that old habits continue to influence the process and likely products of their efforts to build a revived and strengthened Russia.

We arrived in Moscow on the day following Vladimir Putin's inauguration as president of the Russian Federation. We have driven in and around Moscow, have taken an eight hour train ride to teach at Vologda State Pedagogical University, and driven through a blizzard two hours further north to visit 14th century monasteries. We are here from the University of New Hampshire and Franklin Pierce Law Center, in Concord, as participants in a partnership to support curriculum development at Vologda State's law school through a grant from the U.S. Department of State.

Moscow resembles a massive construction site. New luxury apartment buildings, elegantly restored turn-of-the-century hotels, office centers, the notoriously enormous Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and the brick mansions seen from the air on the approach to Sheremetovo Airport rival the scale of construction in Stalin's post-WWII Soviet Union. Even more striking and indicative of the economic shift are the building projects in provincial Vologda and in surrounding villages and towns. Here, also, brick office buildings, luxury townhouses, restored gentry mansions and new wooden houses in the 19th-century style illustrate reviving economic power and new hope, explained by local citizens to be the result of Putin's early moves to increase pensions and state salaries.

The Vologda law school, itself, is a new enterprise committed to instruction in the new constitutional legal order. One week before exams, students came to a classroom equipped with chalk that crumbled when picked up to hear an American teacher present a 15-

hour course in fundamental human rights concepts through an interpreter. The familiar method of teaching is to sit before the master who delivers a lecture, during which they are passive receptors and note-takers only. The students who came to us quickly adjusted to the American style that demanded their active engagement, notwithstanding the risks of embarrassment. They freely discussed limitations on the power of the state to arrest from the perspective that the power of the state must be constrained. They did this interacting with each other, their faculty members and the U.S. teacher without restraint or polite avoidance of matters that 20 years ago, and, perhaps now in the time of Putin, might best have gone unmentioned.

As we have traveled around the Vologda region, we have debated whether the greatest need is economic, legal, medical or engineering assistance. Engineers among us notice the dilapidated buildings and infrastructure. Public transportation, buses, trolleys and trains are worn and dirty. Cars make their shockless ways down potholed and flooded streets. Most everything on wheels appears to have been "ridden hard and put away wet."

Compounding the problem is a puzzling lack of sensible engineering technique, which conceivably could mitigate some of the damage. Should we be showing them how to build and maintain their roadways, or encouraging our SUV manufacturers to start supplying a market where there is a real need?

Construction sites in Vologda display antiquated equipment, understaffed crews and conspicuous lack of safety equipment. The economic camp argues that lack of capital and cash flow are the root cause; the legalists, the lack of regulation. The bottom line is that a major overhaul of the infrastructure is needed immediately, for the health, safety and spirit of the Russian people.

In Vologda there is the potential for a successful tourist industry that could bring in some much needed cash to a city clearly suffering. Although a more distant place, the Vologda region may offer more to the mildly adventurous tourist than Moscow or St. Petersburg.

Vologda, like most of Russia, is a city of contrasts. Look out a window and it is possible to see the dome and delicately filigreed cross of a 17th century Orthodox Church, 100 year old wooden buildings, and Soviet era apartment complexes. A few hours' drive will show the vast wilderness of forest and fields that surrounds the region, broken by peasant villages and magnificently fortified monasteries.

The historical buildings are slowly being restored, but an influx of tourist dollars could speed up the process. Tourists might also wish for a hotel with direct international phone access or food after 6 p.m. on a Saturday. They will find a haven, and hope, in "Stoves and Benches," a restaurant, owned and operated by a local woman. The food and service are warm and good, and the decor reflects folklife and local products. Exquisite hand-sewn quilts hang on the walls. It is clear, the place was built by local people with foresight and optimism.

Further, in its aesthetic and technical perfection, the restaurant embodies the potential that less perfect, but strikingly abundant building projects, both material and intellectual, have displayed to us in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

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May 22, 2000

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