

Russia can learn from Alaska

While the American people focus on who will guide our country for the next four years, the Russian people wrestle with what political and economic system is best for their enormous, sprawling and wealthy country. Remarkable as it may seem, Alaska could play a role in both contests.

George W. Bush wouldn't have been elected president in 2000 without Alaska's three electoral votes. Once again in 2004, our presidential election may be so close that the votes of our small population will make a difference.

Meanwhile across the Bering Strait, President Vladimir Putin has called for sweeping changes to Russia's governing system, and politicians and economists are studying Alaska's "owner state" model as a road to their future.

I have just returned from my second trip to Russia in three months, launching the Russian edition of my book "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution."

In that three-month period, Russia changed dramatically. Terrorism in Moscow and at Public School 1 in Beslan prompted President Putin to call for sweeping changes in the name of "national cohesion." He has submitted legislation to the Duma that empowers the president to name the governors of the 89 Russian regions as well as federal judges.

These proposals prompted criticism from the United States and Western Europe, but the Russian people's response was subdued. As my friend Perry Eaton of Anchorage, who has traveled widely and taught in Russia for years, said before my last trip, "Russia is Russia. Russia is not America. Freedom for the Russian people means freedom from concern."

The greatest outcry from the Russian people while I was there was not over Putin's plans but about the loss of pensions by the elderly and the poverty in outlying areas.

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In 1992, I flew to Moscow for a meeting with President Boris Yeltsin, only to discover he had left town to handle a crisis elsewhere in the country. Instead, I met with Alexander Ruskoi, the vice president.

I urged the post-Soviet regime to follow the Alaska example and move the decision-making from Moscow to the outlying regions. By shifting the decisions from Washington, D.C., to Alaska regarding our 103 million acres of state land, we have built a viable economy, mostly from oil development at the North Slope.

Whether the Yeltsin administration listened to my ideas or not, they followed that course, but it appears they moved too fast. They hadn't put in place the rules we have written into our federal and state constitutions, including a strong judicial system and a business code with antitrust statutes.

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"robber barons" in early 20th century America before President Teddy Roosevelt reined them in, cornered Russia's natural resources. That wealth, the greatest untapped reserve anywhere of oil, gas, diamonds and nearly all other minerals, should be used to elevate the tens of millions of Russians who now live in poverty.

The Moscow Times reported July 21 that "After 2000, with old rules gone, organized crime was the first to take full advantage of the new capitalist way of life."

No, I don't criticize Putin for reining in a chaotic situation. The question is, where does Russia go from here? And it is in that spirit that I released my book at the Izvestia Media Center in Moscow on Oct. 5. The literal translation of the book's title in Russian is "The Problems of Common Property — the Alaska Model, an Opportunity for Russia?"

Common property has been a touchy topic since the fall of communism, but all but a tiny percentage of Russia remains in the "commons." So it was heartening at that press conference in Moscow earlier this month to hear prominent Russians, including Alexander Granberg, the nation's most respected economist, and Mikhail Nikolaev, a deputy chair of the Duma's upper house, extolling the Alaska model.

"If we had followed the Alaska approach over the past 12 years," Granberg told the media, "Russia would have made fewer mistakes."

■ Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966 to 1968 and 1990 to 1994 and as U.S. secretary of the Interior from 1969 to 1970. The founder of the Institute of the North, he serves as the secretary-general of the Northern Forum, an association of 24 northern regions.