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OPINION | LETTERS

The ‘Cesspool Syndrome’ and Big Government

In successful organizations the cream rises to the top, in those in decline, dreck floats to the top.

July 21, 2016 4:26 p.m. ET

Regarding Karen Dawisha’s review of Arkady Ostrovsky’s “The Invention of Russia” (Bookshelf, July 6): With respect to the author’s claim that a “negative selection process,” which eliminated “the best and the brightest,” is responsible for Russia now being “ruled by the worst and least talented . . . villains . . . since before World War II,” your readers may consider that this phenomenon is described in the management literature as the “cesspool syndrome.”

In contrast to successful organizations, in which the cream rises to the top, in those falling victim to decline as in a poorly maintained cesspool, dreck (rather than a less delicate term) floats to the top. As a result, the early departure (or in the case of Russia, physical elimination) of qualified employees inhibits recovery and, if unchecked, accelerates decline. In the commercial world, those in a declining organization that can go (i.e., those who are qualified and capable of turning an organization around), go. In contrast, those who can’t (i.e., those with limited talent and no other opportunities), stay. Ironically, in such a situation incompetence ultimately leads to success, as an organization’s talent pool is depleted and it must depend on the leadership of its least unqualified employees for its future survival. Such situations are all the more difficult as an organization’s former best and brightest employees are often employed by its competition or, in the case of Russia, leave the country.

Em. Prof. Arthur G. Bedeian

Louisiana State University

Baton Rouge, La.

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