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The Honorary Academic

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Summary:

Mira Markovic is an "Honorary Academic" of the Russian Academy of Science. It cost a lot of money to obtain this title and the Serb multi-billionnaire Karic was only too glad to cough it up.

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Article Body:

Mira Markovic is an "Honorary Academic" of the Russian Academy of Science. It cost a lot of money to obtain this title and the Serb multi-billionnaire Karic was only too glad to cough it up. Whatever else you say about Balkan cronies, they rarely bite the hand that feeds them (unless and until it is expedient to do so). And whatever else you say about Russia, it adapted remarkably to capitalism. Everything has a price and a market. Israel had to learn this fact the hard way when Russian practical-nurse-level medical doctors and construction-worker-level civil engineers flooded its shores. Everything is for sale in this region of opportunities, instant education inclusive.

It seems that academe suffered the most during the numerous shock therapies and transition periods showered upon the impoverished inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe. The resident of decrepit communist-era buildings, it had to cope with a flood of eager students and a deluge of anachronistic "scholars". But in Russia, the CIS and the Balkans the scenery is nothing short of Dantesque. Unschooled in any major European language, lazily content with their tenured positions, stagnant and formal - the academics and academicians of the Balkans are both failures and a resounding indictment of the rigor mortis that was socialism. Economics textbooks stop short of mentioning Friedman or Phelps. History textbooks should better be relegated to the science fiction shelves. A brave facade of self sufficiency covers up a vast hinterland of inferiority complex fully supported by real inferiority. In antiquated libraries, shattered labs, crooked buildings and inadequate facilities, student pursue redundant careers with the wrong teachers.

Corruption seethes under this repellent surface. Teachers sell exams, take

bribes, trade incestuous sex with their students. They refuse to contribute to their communities. In all my years in the Balkans, I have yet to come across a voluntary act - a single voluntary act - by an academic. And I have come across numerous refusals to help and to contribute. Materialism incarnate.

This sorry state of affairs has a twofold outcome. On the one hand, herds of victims of rigidly dictated lectures and the suppression of free thought. These academic products suffer from the twin afflictions of irrelevance of skills and the inability to acquire relevant ones, the latter being the result of decades of brainwashing and industrial educational methods. Unable to match their anyhow outdated knowledge with anything a modern marketplace can offer - they default on to menial jobs, rebel or pull levers to advance in life. Which leads us to the death of meritocracy and why this region's future is behind it.

In the wake of the downfall of all the major ideologies of the 20th century - Fascism, Communism, etc. the New Order, heralded by President Bush, emerged as a battle of Open Club versus Closed Club societies, at least from the economic point of view.

All modern states and societies must choose whether to be governed by merit (meritocracy) or by the privileged few (oligarchy). It is inevitable that the social and economic structures be controlled by elites. It is a complex world and only a few can master the knowledge it takes to govern effectively. What sets meritocracy apart is not the number of members of its ruling (or leading) class, usually no larger than an oligarchy. No, it is distinguished by its membership criteria and by the mode of their application.

The meritocratic elite is an open club because it satisfies three conditions:

- 1.. The process and rules of joining up (i.e., the criteria) are transparent and widely known.
- 2.. The application and membership procedures are uniform, equal to all and open to continuous public scrutiny and criticism.
- 3.. The system alters its membership requirements in direct response to public feedback and to the changing social and economic environment.

To belong to a meritocracy one needs to satisfy a series of demands, whose attainment is entirely up to the individual. And that is all that one needs to do. The rules of joining and of membership are cast in iron. The wishes and opinions of those who happen to comprise the club at any given moment are of no importance and of no consequence. Meritocracy is a "fair play" by rules of equal chance to derive benefits. Put differently, is the rule of law.

To join a meritocratic club, one needs to demonstrate that one is in possession

of, or has access to, "inherent" parameters, such as intelligence, a certain level of education, a potential to contribute to society. An inherent parameter must correspond to a criterion and the latter must be applied independent of the views and predilections of those who sometimes are forced to apply it. The members of a committee or a board can disdain an applicant, or they might wish not to approve a candidate. Or they may prefer someone else for the job because they owe her something, or because they play golf with him. Yet, they are permitted to consider only the applicant's or the candidate's "inherent" parameters: does he have the necessary tenure, qualifications, education, experience? Does he contribute to his workplace, community, society at large? In other words: is he "worthy" or "deserving"? Not WHO he is - but WHAT he is.

Granted, these processes of selection, admission, incorporation and assimilation are administered by mere humans and are, therefore, subject to human failings. Can qualifications be always judged "objectively, unambiguously and unequivocally"? Can "the right personality traits" or "the ability to engage in teamwork" be evaluated "objectively"? These are vague and ambiguous enough to accommodate bias and bad will. Still, at least appearances are kept in most cases - and decisions can be challenged in courts.

What characterizes oligarchy is the extensive, relentless and ruthless use of "transcendent" (in lieu of "inherent") parameters to decide who will belong where, who will get which job and, ultimately, who will enjoy which benefits. The trouble with transcendent parameters is that there is nothing much an applicant or a candidate can do about them. Usually, they are accidents, occurrences absolutely beyond the reach or control of those most affected by them. Race is such a transcendent parameter and so are gender, familial affiliation or contacts and influence.

In many corners of the globe, to join a closed, oligarchic club, to get the right job, to enjoy excessive benefits - one must be white (racism), male (sexual discrimination), born to the right family (nepotism), or to have the right political (or other) contacts (cronyism). And often, belonging to one such club is the prerequisite for joining another.

In France, for instance, the whole country is politically and economically run by graduates of the Ecole Normale d'Administration (ENA). They are known as the ENArques (=the royal dynasty of ENA graduates).

The privatization of state enterprises in most East and Central European countries provided a glaring example of oligarchic machinations. In most of these countries (the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Serbia and Russia are notorious examples) - state companies, the nation's only assets, were "sold" to political

cronies, creating in the process a pernicious amalgam of capitalism and oligarchy, known as "crony capitalism" or privateering. The national wealth was passed on to the hands of relatively few, well connected, individuals, at a ridiculously low price. The nations involved were robbed, their riches either squandered or smuggled abroad.

In the affairs of humans, not everything falls neatly into place. Take money, for instance. Is it an inherent parameter or an expressly transcendent one? Making money indicates the existence of some merit, some inherent advantageous traits of the money-making individual. To make money consistently, a person needs to be diligent, resilient, hard working, to prevail and overcome hardships, to be far sighted and to possess a host of other - universally acclaimed - traits. On the other hand, is it fair when someone who made his fortune through corruption, inheritance, or luck - be preferred to a poor genius?

That is a contentious issue. In the USA money talks. Being possessed of money means being virtuous and meritorious. To preserve a fortune inherited is as difficult a task as to make it in the first place, the thinking goes. Thus, the source of the money is secondary.

An oligarchy tends to have long term devastating economic effects.

The reason is that the best and the brightest - when shut out by the members of the ruling elites - emigrate. In a country where one's job is determined by his family connections or by influence peddling - those best fit to do the job are likely to be disappointed, then disgusted and then to leave the place altogether.

This is the phenomenon known as "Brain Drain". It is one of the biggest migratory tidal waves in human history. Capable, well-trained, educated, young people leave their oligarchic, arbitrary, influence peddling societies and migrate to less arbitrary meritocracies (mostly to be found in what is collectively known as "The West").

This is colonialism of the worst kind. The mercantilist definition of a colony is a territory which exports raw materials only to re-import them in the form of finished products. The Brain drain is exactly that: the poorer countries are exporting raw brains and buying back the finished products masterminded, invented and manufactured by theses brains.

Yet, while in classical colonialism, the colony at least received some recompense for its goods - here the poor country is actually the poorer for its

exports. The bright young people who depart (most of them never to return) carry with them an investment of the scarce resources of their homeland - and award it to their new, much richer, host countries. This is an absurd situation, a subsidy granted reluctantly by the poor to the rich. This is also one of the largest capital transfers (really capital flight) in history.

Some poor countries understood these basic, unpleasant, facts of life. They extracted an "education fee" from those emigrating. This fee was supposed to, at least partially, recapture the costs of educating and training the immigrants. Romania and the USSR imposed such levies on Jews emigrating to Israel in the 1970s. Others despairingly regard the brain drain as a natural catastrophe. Very few countries are trying to tackle the fundamental, structural and philosophical flaws of the system, the roots of the disenchantment of those who leave.

The Brain Drain is so serious that some countries lost up to a third of their total young and educated population to it (Macedonia in South-eastern Europe, some less developed countries in South East Asia and in Africa). Others were drained of almost one half of the growth in their educated workforce (for instance, Israel during the 1980s).

Brains are an ideal natural resource: they can be cultivated, directed, controlled, manipulated, regulated. They are renewable and replicable. Brains tend to grow exponentially through interaction and they have an unparalleled economic value added. The profit margin in knowledge and information related industries far exceeds anything common to more traditional, second wave, industries (not to mention first wave agriculture and agribusiness).

What is even more important:

Poor countries are uniquely positioned to take advantage of this third revolution. With cheap, educated workforce - they can monopolize basic data processing and telecommunications functions worldwide. True, this calls for massive initial investments in physical infrastructure. But the important input is the wetware, the brains. To constrain them, to disappoint them, to make them run away, to more merit-orientated places - is to sentence oneself to a permanent disadvantage and deprivation.

This is what the countries in the Balkans are doing. Driving away the best part of their population by encouraging the worst part. Abandoning their future by dwelling on their past. Caught in a fatal spider web of family connections and political cronyism of their own design. Their factories and universities and offices and government filled to the brim with third rate relatives of third rate professors and bureaucrats. Turning themselves into third rate countries in

a self perpetuating, self feeding process of decline. And all the while eyeing the new and the foreign with the paranoia that is the result of true guilt.