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Russia's love for Dr M a peculiar phenomenon

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Dr Mahathir's book translated into Russian and launched in Moscow



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"A DOCTOR In The House", the book of memoirs by Malaysia's most famous of the prime ministers, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has been translated into Russian and launched in a ceremony at Moscow's prestigious book shop, the Biblio Globe.

I was honoured, among several other people, to speak at the event, and also listen carefully to what other people said. The general impression is that Russia's special love to Dr Mahathir is a peculiar phenomenon worth attention.

Down Under

The big question for any book published anywhere in the world is about its audience. For ordinary Russian public, Malaysia is still an unknown land south of Thailand.

Several million Russians have visited Thailand by now, but for some mysterious reason it's the Arabs who play in Malaysia the role of Russians in Thailand. So what



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kind of Russian would care to buy two volumes of a book telling about nation-building in an almost totally unknown land?

Being aware of all that, the publishers approached their task as an academic exercise. The key figure in the project was Dr Victor Sumsky, head of the Asean-centre in Moscow's most prestigious State University of Foreign Relations (SUFR), a place where they train future diplomats and others.

There is a lot of people speaking in Bahasa Malaysia in Moscow and other places, and their concentration in SUFR is noticeable. Almost all of the Bahasa Malaysia students in SUFR participated in translation of the

memoirs, while their professors did the editing.

The obvious result is that the book became a part of the studies, and that means that it had a guaranteed and important audience even before being printed.

But then there are other potential readers, and my own speech at the ceremony was directed at them. I said that Dr Mahathir's book is for the future presidents of Russia, their members of Cabinets and all the voters of the nation. It shows them the difference between a politician and a statesman, a top executive and a national leader.

This is, as far as I know, the third book by/on Dr Mahathir in Russian history. I participated in the first one, contributing an essay titled "The Art of Being Unpleasant".

The time of that publication was the end of 1990s, and it made all the difference. The thing is, Russia's president at the time was Boris Yeltsin, and he was no Dr Mahathir at all.

Vladimir Putin

All the political circles of our country were thinking about what kind of person we needed to pull the nation out of the total crisis we were encountering. And then Vladimir Putin came along.

Not many people know, I went on in my speech at the presentation,

exactly how much Putin have learned directly from Dr Mahathir. We only know they talked a lot. There is a chance, though, that Putin's political style has evolved completely by itself, out of dire necessity. In any case similarities between these two statesmen are striking.

Let us list these similarities:

1. Both Putin and Dr Mahathir have created/restored national pride. The Malaysian leader did it by openly telling his own people of its endemic drawbacks. Putin did the reverse, by telling Russians about their advantages.

The two leaders acted in different environments, Malaysians encountering no moral devastation of the 1990s, when national pride has been subjected to all kind of bombardments. But the result was the same.

2. Both statesmen mastered the art of being...see above — unpleasant, of saying things that, theoretically, should not be said. There is a global demand for national leaders capable of saying to big powers the things that other leaders are afraid to pronounce.

Dr Mahathir has undoubtedly paved the way for Putin by being the first to tell the West a lot of things unthinkable, while still not overstepping the invisible lines of acceptability.

The same Dr Mahathir has shown that a nation may actually gain by that

frankness, instantly becoming diplomatically interesting to dozens of other states of the world.

3. The ability to do the unexpected, and winning where others are losing due to being too obvious. Dr Mahathir displayed that capacity when fighting the financial crisis of 1997-1999, Putin acts the same way in dangerous situations over Syria and, previously, Ukraine.

4. Last is, of course, the long-term thinking, the ability to pursue one goal after another in national development. A lot of good things that happens to Russia now and are very handy in the middle of the current crisis, were laid down more than 10 years ago, when Putin was only starting his career at the top.

The surprising revival of Russia's military might is just one example, and how did Putin know in 2004-2005 when laying down these plans, that the nation would need it 10 years later?

There is one big difference between these two people, though. Putin doesn't write books.

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