

Russia Reflections

by Michael Abkin

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INTRODUCTION

The Russia we saw is not the Russia you read or hear about. Not by a long shot.

Family and friends have asked me why I would want to go there. “They are meddling in our elections and trying to destroy our democracy.” “Putin is a murderer and dictator.” And so on. That’s the story about Russia that our government and media are telling us, anyway. Without judging the veracity of that story one way or the other, we have to admit that both sides have over the decades meddled in one another’s affairs and in the affairs of others, as well; we ourselves have been instrumental in the overthrow of democratically elected governments in favor of others more aligned with our strategic objectives. Actually, there’s more meddling from within our borders than from without. Specifically, the likes of voter suppression, gerrymandering, and Supreme Court interventions have had much greater consequence than anything Russia (meaning the Russian *government*) might have done.

Placing the issue of elections meddling in a larger historical context, therefore, I just think this game of back-and-forth, tit-for-tat dirty tricks has been going on far too long and is getting us nowhere fast, except maybe to oblivion. It’s time to change the game and start over building good relations from scratch – from below, from the people, from the heart. Because governments aren’t going to do it.

With this in mind, I traveled to Russia in September 2018 as part of a group of about 25 self-appointed U.S. citizen diplomats. Our ages ranged from teens to eighties, and we came from all four corners of the country and places in between. Our professional backgrounds included engineering, law, medicine, healthcare administration, real estate development, journalism, education, public administration, and more. Even a couple of high school students. Organized by Sharon Tennison and her [Center for Citizen Initiatives](#) (CCI), our mission was four-fold.

First, we wanted to experience with our own eyes, ears, and hearts, the Russia of today – its people, its culture, its daily life – bypassing the media messaging and political posturing and storytelling of both sides. Second, we wanted to bring those experiences and insights home to share with our families, friends, and fellow Americans. Third, we wanted to help everyday Russians bypass those same filters and get to know something of everyday America and Americans. Finally, and ultimately, we in this way wanted to do whatever we could to stem and even abate the rising tide of misunderstandings, misperceptions, animosity, and bellicosity that threaten to inundate us all, once again, in military or even, heaven forbid, nuclear conflict. Thus, while our mission was itself not overtly political, we hope it will have some political ripples for peace and partnership between our nations.

In the following, I first describe some impressions of and experiences at the *places* we visited – Moscow, Saratov, and St. Petersburg. Then come some of my insights and learnings about Russia, Russians, and their life and culture from the *people* we met in those places. Finally, although my fervent and primary intention on this trip was to focus on meeting, connecting with, and learning from the people of Russia, it was impossible to totally avoid *politics*.

A caveat: I do not pretend these observations and reflections to be by any means the findings of definitive research and study or survey sampling. They represent merely my own takeaways

based on one person's experience of two weeks in Russia and listening to the Russians I happened to encounter.

PART 1: PLACES

The trip began with five days in Moscow, where we all convened and met for the first time as a group. We had Q&A briefings with “experts” from fields of print and broadcast journalism, government and politics, and business. And we experienced the Moscow Metro, visited schools and cultural sites, and struck out on our own to just walk the streets of the city. Then we split up into groups of two to four and fanned out to cities in nine regions around the country to get a brief, four-day flavor of life outside the capital. In my case, I was in a group of three that went to the industrial city of Saratov, on the banks of the Volga River. Finally, we reconvened in Saint Petersburg for six days of sharing our regional stories and impressions; meeting with university students, Rotarians, businessmen, and people in their homes; and visiting sites in and around that spectacular city of culture, canals, and history.

Moscow

As Finnair flight 713 from Helsinki descended into Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport, the vast sprawl of this city of 12 million to 13 million people rolled past below us. Friday evening rush hour was well underway, and I was transfixed watching from above as parallel lines of red and white beads inched, rosary-like, in opposite directions along the many strands of the web of Moscow's urban roadways. Once on the ground, passport and visa control was a snap and customs control nonexistent. CCI's long-time man-on-the-ground in Russia, Volodya Shestakov, had chartered a bus to take us all (there were several of us on that flight) into town to the Cosmos Hotel. On the way, we passed mile after mile of auto row, with facilities of most of the world's auto manufacturers. Sprinkled among them were shopping malls hosting, along with Russian shops and department stores, the inevitable McDonald's, Burger King, and KFC outlets.



Cosmos Hotel

More later, under *People* and *Politics*, about key takeaways from our Moscow visit, including from the experts Sharon had lined up to speak with us. They came from the fields of print and television journalism, foreign affairs, business, and economics. But for now a few experiences around the city.

The Metro

Moscow's [Metro system](#) is a wonder to behold, and we had an opportunity to behold it on an extensive, docented, and exhausting tour scheduled on our first full day in Moscow. The system is always crowded; many if not all the stations in its vast network are works of art, each with a different

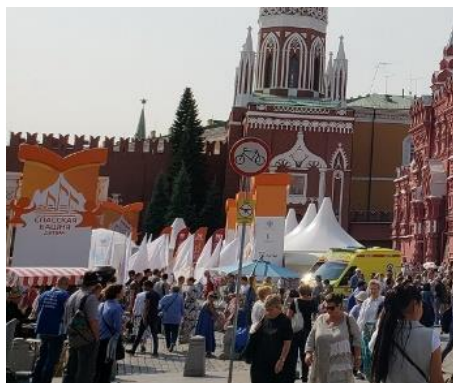


theme; and the trains run amazingly frequently, with headways ranging from a minute and a half to three minutes. And, without fail, as crowded as the train cars were, people always stood to let us “older folks” have a seat. I’ll never understand, though, how they knew we qualified for such special treatment!

The stations, platforms, and trains are super clean. Indeed, the whole city was. We saw virtually no graffiti, no trash in the streets, and no beggars or homeless people. We were told, though, that there had been a great deal of clean-up work in preparation for hosting the recent World Cup tournament.

We asked our guide if there were safety or security issues on the trains or in the stations. She looked at us blankly, not understanding what we were asking. When we explained, she said absolutely not. The system is very safe. In fact, from what we were told, the whole city is safe, even for a woman walking the streets alone at night. Ditto for the other cities we visited.

Back-to-School Day



Festival in Red Square

Our first day in Moscow was unexpectedly (for us, anyway) a national holiday. Every year, September 1 is celebrated as Back-to-School Day. Indeed, every school across this 11-time-zone-spanning nation begins the school year on this same day. Even this year, when September 1 fell on a Saturday, kids and parents went to the schools for holiday festivities, and the streets, metros, and plazas were filled with families, parades, and street musicians. Even the vast Red Square, infamous in the West for parades of tanks and missile launchers, and just outside the equally infamous Kremlin, was now filled with carnival tents, food stands, and parades of people enjoying the sunny skies and celebrating the day’s significance.

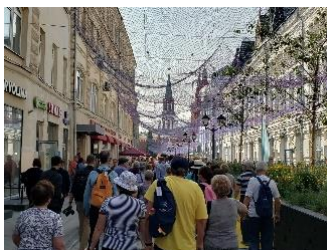
A children’s talent show was being held at our hotel, for which the conference center was filled with bundles of balloon horses, dragons, and bouquets. Little children in brightly colored clothes and costumes excitedly teemed into and out of the hotel lobby, some skipping ahead of their lagging parents, others dragging a father or mother by the hand.

Other Views of Moscow



Monument to the space program atop the [Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics](#)

View at dusk from [GUM](#), across Red Square to Lenin’s Tomb and the Kremlin



Back-to-School festival crowd



And, now, on to Saratov.

Saratov

On Wednesday, Louise, Nancy, and I taxied to Moscow's domestic airport, Domodedovo, where we boarded S7 Airlines flight 207 for the hour and forty minute trip to Saratov. [Saratov](#) is an industrial city of almost a million people. While its main industry now is oil and gas, it used to be a major military manufacturing center and was thus one of many closed cities during Soviet times. That is, people could only travel there with special permission. Saratov is located southeast of Moscow on the west (right) bank of the Volga River. Across the river begins thousands of miles of the vast steppes of Russia.

Our Hosts

We were met at Saratov's airport by Olga, Rifat, and Marina. Olga, CCI's local contact person, arranged and managed our itinerary and served as mother hen and interpreter throughout our stay. She used to have a career working with a British firm counseling people and companies wanting to invest and do business in Russia; that work went away a few years ago when the U.S. sanctions hit and foreign investors disappeared.

Rifat and Marina hosted us in their home for the four days we spent in in their city. The two of them shared the cooking and tending to our needs. The tea they served was made from the herbs grown in their own garden, and Rifat showed off his canning hobby, which again uses fruits and vegetables from their own garden. They have three daughters, the youngest of whom is studying medicine at a university in Berlin.



*Olga, Rifat, and Marina
at Breakfast*

Rifat is a successful businessman. He started from nothing, working as a driver for a clothing manufacturing partnership, eventually becoming a partner himself. Now the company owns a network of dental clinics and an office building, which they converted from the old shoe factory they purchased a few years before. Marina, having retired from her professional career, now volunteers teaching art in schools. And the couple converted part of their property to a playground, which they keep open for neighborhood children to just drop in whenever they want.



*Louise, Nancy, and I with Rifat
at his Saratov home*



Home Canning

Our Itinerary

The cultural activities and public appearances Olga put together for us kept us on the go our four days in Saratov. Included were visits to museums, conversations with students at the Saratov Technical University and with young people at an English language club, a lunch with the Saratov

chapter of the Peace Fund (which promotes sister-city relationships between Russian cities and cities around the world), a student-led walking tour of downtown Saratov, a visit with a local businessman who recruits volunteers to fix up dilapidated low-income housing, the seventh annual historic re-enactment of a 700-year-old Tatar encampment, and an excursion on the Volga River. More on what we learned from these visits in *People* and *Politics*.



Either Rifat or Marina would do the driving, along with the occasional smartphone-app-driven taxi or ride-share service. (Ride-share services such as Uber or the local counterpart Yandex are ubiquitous and fairly inexpensive in Russia.) And one morning, Marina walked us from the house up to the nearby open-air market where she does her daily fresh produce, meat, and fish shopping.

Galina Lashikova, a professor of philology at Saratov State University, organized a tour for us to the Saratov art museum, which was established in 1885 as the first public (as opposed to private) art museum in Russia. The tour was docented by one of her students, Ludmilla, who is also a volunteer at the museum. Following the museum, Galina, Ludmilla, and three others of Galina's students led us on a walking tour of downtown Saratov, including the civic center and the beautiful, tree-lined promenade down to the Volga River waterfront. That promenade, with its shops, cafés, and kiosks, seemed for me to be the Champs Elysées of Saratov.



Promenade to the Volga



Our tour guides



Pedestrian paseo



Street scene

Ah, yes, the [Volga River](#). For some reason, the sound of it fills me with a sense of history, adventure, and even familiarity. Maybe a former life – who knows? Anyway, Marina and Olga took us across the river to the town of Engels (yes, named after *that* Engels!), where we walked on the promenade flanking the river and then took a boat excursion to get a feel for the river. Here are some scenes from the Engels promenade and the boat.



Nancy and Olga on the Volga



Engels father and child



Boat view of Saratov



Romance in public art



Love Locks over the Volga

I will save some specific learnings and insights from the people of Saratov for the *People* section below. But, for now, on to St. Petersburg.

St. Petersburg

On Sunday, Rifat and Olga drove Nancy, Louise, and me to the Saratov airport to catch S7 flight 206 back to Moscow's Domodedovo Airport and connection on to St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport. Even though we arrived very late at night, Volodya was there to greet us with a Yandex ride to the Red Stars Hotel.

Because it was dark, we didn't see much on the way in, but the next morning Louise and I awoke to the delight of finding out that our room overlooked one of St. Petersburg's charming canals.

Most of the next day was spent meeting as a group to share our experiences in the regional cities we'd just returned from. The following days were filled with tours of cultural and historical sites, just walking around and getting a feel for this famously beautiful city, and, of course, meetings with university students, a filmmaker, and in the home of a St. Petersburg family. More in *People* and *Politics* on my takeaways from those meetings, but first some of the sites of the city.



The Hermitage

Construction of the [Hermitage](#) in St. Petersburg began in 1754, during the closing years of the reign of Empress Elizabeth and completed in time for Empress Catherine II (Catherine the Great) to move in in 1763 and use it as her Winter Palace. The following year, Catherine began her accumulation of artwork and the Winter Palace became also a museum. Over the next 20 years, Catherine added other buildings to the complex of what together was to become known as "The Hermitage".



A few scenes from our Hermitage tour – exterior, gardens, chapel, and, in a courtyard, a volleyball game in progress:



The Summer Palace

We boarded a bus for the ride to [Catherine the Great's Summer Palace](#), near the town of Pushkin. Like the Hermitage, the Summer Palace also dates from the mid-18th century. The building and its contents are truly artistic treasures. Reduced to a burnt out shell during the 28 months of occupation in the World War II Siege of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), the Palace and its gardens have been nearly completely restored to their former glory.

The scenes here include an exterior view of the palace, a garden arbor, a mirrored view of our group in the Grand Hall, and, particularly fascinating for this engineer, a corner duct of the palace's heating system, which services the four rooms radiating from it:



The Mariinsky Concert Hall

Louise and I really wanted to sample some of the storied cultural life of St. Petersburg. We got the opportunity when Glenn, a member of our group, told us he had a couple of extra tickets to a piano recital at the [Mariinsky Concert Hall](#). So, the three of us thoroughly enjoyed 27-year-old piano virtuoso [Daniil Trifonov](#) perform



works of Beethoven and Schumann. We were sitting close enough to be enthralled by the passion with which Trifonov rendered the works not only on the piano but also through his very expressive face and body language. I was so rapt that I just couldn't take photos during the performance but did manage to capture the elegant beauty of the new concert hall as we were standing to leave.

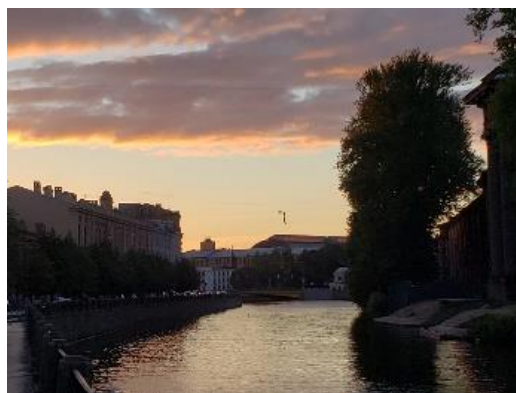
Coffeelosophy

I got lost wandering around the city one afternoon, trying to find my way back to our hotel, when I stumbled on this café. No way could I resist dropping in for an espresso! It was a tiny place, only four tables and the barista. As I came in and took my seat at one of the tables, two young women were talking animatedly at another. I could not understand what they were talking about but could only assume it must have had something to do with the meaning of life, or the future of humanity, or some such weighty subject for such a heady place.



Rivers and Canals

The city was founded in 1703 by Emperor Peter the Great. Located on the Neva River delta, where the river empties into the Gulf of Finland, probably the most striking features of St. Petersburg are its over 300 km of [rivers and canals](#) and the over 800 bridges that cross them.



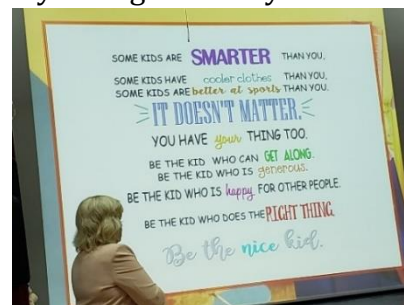
The morning following the above sunset, several of us piled into a van for the ride to Pulkovo Airport, where we caught Finnair flight 702 to Helsinki and then on to home.

PART 2: PEOPLE

It was the direct experience with the people of Russia – in Moscow, Saratov, and St. Petersburg – that taught me the most about how much alike Russians and Americans are, how much we are different, and how we might turn away from a path of increasing, and increasingly dangerous, conflict and towards a future of understanding and mutual respect.

Back-to-School Day

On Monday, the actual first day of school, Nancy (a former Sister City Commissioner of Santa Clara County, California) took Louise, Maddelyn, Joe, and me along on her visit to the school-year-opening ceremonies at the Slavic-Anglo-American School. This Moscow private school is a sister school to a public school in Gilroy, California. We were met and warmly welcomed by Head Mistress Tatiana Yurovskaya and Principal Marina Lyubimova, who took time out from their huge first-day-of-school responsibilities to explain the history and educational mission of the school. This school covers grades 1 through 11, the normal elementary-to-high school years in Russia. As a private school, it follows, as it must for accreditation, the standard government-specified curriculum and then goes beyond with additional educational experiences. For example, whereas the government curriculum requires one foreign language, this school requires its students to do three, with English the first one introduced in grade one and others introduced in later years. Many of the classes are actually taught in English. Posters throughout the school promote both English language and social-emotional learning.



On this day, we observed the first-day celebration of the first grade class. With parents gathered in the back of the community room, the kids filed in and sat in the front rows. To welcome the first graders to the start of their academic careers (beyond



kindergarten or pre-school), kids from older classes staged a musical skit for the newcomers. Each new pupil was given a part, even if only one line. In one ritual, a teddy bear was given to the student at one end of the line, who then turned to the next one and passed the bear on along with a bear hug. And so on down the line, so that each first grader got to hug the bear and get and give hugs to their neighbors. At the close, each was given a bell to ring, symbolically representing the ringing of the first school bell of the year. It was a heart-warming, even emotional, experience for me to witness. And it would be only the first of such experiences during my stay in Russia.

Some Fear Us, Some Love Us, Some Both

Our mission of improving people-to-people relations between Americans and Russians is clearly needed on both sides. Some of the people and organizations Olga approached to set up visits for us in Saratov demurred upon hearing we were Americans; others welcomed the opportunity with enthusiasm.

In one case, following our visit to the Saratov Technical University, one young man came up to me as we were leaving and said he had come highly skeptical of what Americans might have to say, not sure of what to expect or what he would learn. Now, based on what he had heard, he was leaving the event happy and hopeful.

Another experience occurred in the Saratov market. A few merchants Marina tried to introduce us to recoiled when hearing we were Americans, while others were very warm and welcoming. One weathered man selling watermelons, who later said he was from Baku, Azerbaijan, rushed up and threw his arms around me shouting, "I love you! I love you!" as he pushed a 20-pound watermelon into my arms and insisted I take it as a gift. After such a greeting, I didn't mind at all lugging that watermelon the 3 or 4 blocks back to the house!



Cultural Heritage

Russia's population numbers about 150 million and is made up of over 180 distinct ethnic groups. Perhaps at least in part due to this broad diversity, Russians have a deep connection to and reverence for their rich history and cultural heritage.



Louise, Nancy, Olga, and I had an opportunity to experience this dedication firsthand when the head of the Saratov Rotary Club invited us to accompany him and some of his colleagues to an historic re-enactment at the ruins of the 13th and 14th century Tatar settlement of [Ukek](#), about 10 kilometers south of Saratov. We donned hemp gunny sacks over our clothes



and walked by tent encampments and among people dressed in various period outfits as they prepared food, potted, and worked on other crafts in the manner of those days.



Louise, Ready for Battle

This was the seventh annual such re-enactment. It is all organized and mounted by volunteers in association with the Saratov Historical Society, who spend a week reliving those times. At the closing weekend of that week, the City of Saratov contributes to the festivities by providing buses and vans to help bring visitors to the site, of whom there are about 50 thousand to 70 thousand each year.



Invited by our Rotary connection, we were able to avoid the crowds and be there the day before the public opening.

Volunteerism on the Rise

President Putin declared this year of 2018 to be a Year of Volunteerism. Most people recognized this as part of a strategy to encourage the population to pitch in and support Russia's hosting of the World Cup. It was definitely a successful strategy, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of mostly young people traveling to the various World Cup venues to lend a hand. More generally, though, Russians told us on more than one occasion that volunteerism has not been part of their culture. So, it remains to be seen to what degree this World Cup experience will have lasting effect on volunteerism in the country.

Contrary to what we heard about volunteerism in Russia, however, we met directly with people actively volunteering in their communities and saw many signs of its emergence and growing presence. I've already mentioned the community activities of our Saratov hosts Rifat and Marina, the huge volunteer effort mounted every year for the historic re-enactment at Ukek, and the fact that there is a Rotary Club in Saratov. Indeed, there are Rotary Clubs all over Russia. I'll give two more examples.

Saratov and Dallas, Texas, are sister cities. The Peace Fund is a NGO (non-governmental organization) active throughout Russia that fosters sister city relationships between Russian cities and cities elsewhere in the world. We had lunch one day with members of Saratov's Peace Fund chapter (including Galina, the Saratov State University philology professor), hosted by the chapter head, Alexander, at his restaurant. As we ate, Alexander reminisced about his visit to the United States in 1998 to visit Dallas. Dallas held poignant memories for him: as a 7-year-old boy, he would draw pictures of various ways he might have been able to save President Kennedy from the assassin's bullet. (And I shared with him my own story of how that assassination, which occurred while I was out of the country on a junior year abroad, shaped my international perspective and career path.) During his trip to the U.S., Alexander also traveled to Los Angeles, where, quite by chance, he happened to witness the placing of the star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame of the leader of his favorite band, Creedence Clearwater Revival's John Fogerty.



Later that same afternoon, we met another Alexander, this one a business man who, in addition to being active in the local chapter of the opposition political party (yes, there is one), had taken it upon himself to do what he could to make Saratov a pleasant place to live. After some months of effort, he managed to pull together a team of volunteers to repaint and refurbish the exterior of a 100-year-old house that sat on a downtown street and was home to several low-income families, a work that had recently been completed. Alexander said that, while the work was going on, residents would come out and offer tea to the workers. When he asked if we had such community improvement volunteerism in the United States, I told him about Habitat for Humanity and helped him find the website on his cell phone.



Young People

Everywhere we went, it was the young people who most inspired me with hope and admiration. Even the first graders at the Moscow elementary school showed an eagerness for learning and, through the bear hugs they gave one another, for growing into a caring community. Others were the 30 engineering and IT students at the Saratov Technical University; the four philology students from the Saratov State University, who guided us on the downtown walking tour; the 30-35 students and young office workers who showed up to see us at the Saratov café's English Club; and the four university students who met with us at our St. Petersburg hotel.

Time and time again, at all our encounters, students expressed a yearning for connection with their counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere. We of course talked about reaching out through the internet through, for example, Facebook or other social media or possibly setting up a dedicated network for just this purpose. Beyond that, they showed a keen interest in exchange programs, internships, and other opportunities for working and studying abroad. I tried to encourage them by pointing out that it will be their generation who can make the biggest difference in the world as they move into positions of responsibility where they could further nurture such heart-to-heart connections.



Talking with Julia at the Café

At the Saratov café, we fielded questions about our backgrounds, life in America, why we were there, what surprised us most about Saratov and Russia, and if we were optimistic or pessimistic about the future of our relations. With great temerity, I risked (perish the thought!) a political discussion when I held my breath and asked obliquely what challenges they saw to better relations between our countries. Immediately and without hesitation, Russia's future stood up and asserted firmly

that they did not want to get into discussions of what governments do, that they wanted to stay in the realm of person-to-person relations, and that they wanted to focus not on the past but on how to go forward. I guess I got told! And what a relief and joy it was, too.



The Café Crowd

And they wouldn't let us leave! After our formal session, as we were getting up to leave, they were excited and eager to have selfies and other photos taken with us, and they invited us to split up and sit with them in smaller groups at their tables. The three or four who took me to their table asked about my family and continued the conversation about Russia-U.S. youth connections. One of them, 28-year-old Vitaly, followed up a few days later by emailing me about ways we might actually foster and support such connections and seeking contacts who could help with that. And, finally, once we were at last able to leave the building and were standing downstairs in the street, one young man ran after us to stress how excited he was by our visit and how much he wanted to stay in touch. I hope someone in our group got his contact information!

And then there was Sergei. Sergei, the son of a friend of our Saratov hosts Rifat and Marina, joined us for dinner one evening. I would guess he's in his mid to late 20s. After graduating

from a Moscow law faculty with a BA in law and a MA in tax law, he worked for a year for a Moscow-based American law firm that advises and represents American firms doing business in Russia. He recently resigned from the firm, citing his frustration helping foreign firms keep up with the complexity of rapidly changing Russian tax laws. And he has realized that he would rather be spending his energies and talents in service of Russia. Sergei's plan now is to do his required year of military service and then stay in the military for further training in communications as an interpreter. After 10 years of service, he will then be eligible to retire with a pension and apply those skills, including his English language skills, in the private sector or possibly even in politics – he's open to opportunities that may present themselves at the time.



Meeting Students in St. Petersburg

Our final opportunity to engage with young Russians was presented by the four university students who spoke with us at our St. Petersburg hotel the afternoon before our departure for home. They were looking ahead to careers in teaching, journalism, poetry, and where they could use their English language skills. Speaking of how they'd measure success in their lives (one of us must have asked such a question!), they spoke of success as having a feeling of personal fulfillment in their chosen career. One added that he'd also be happy and feel successful if he were to have enough money to travel.

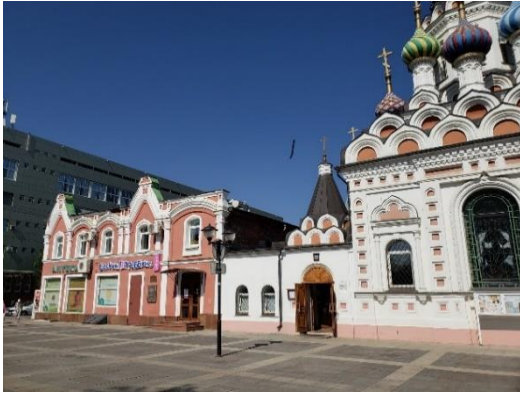
I found these four to be bright, articulate, and deeply thoughtful about Russia, the U.S., the world, and the challenges facing us all. In fact, our conversation touched on the importance of critical thinking and the vital importance of teaching critical thinking in schools in the face of today's decline in responsible journalism and rise in fake news, alternative facts, and viral memes in social media. To that list I would add (and this is just me talking) psychology-based advertising, spin doctoring, and fear mongering, both commercial and political.

Sparked by another question from our group of visiting Americans, we also had a fascinating conversation about spiritual and religious life in both countries – but I'll put this topic into another section, on Religious Life.

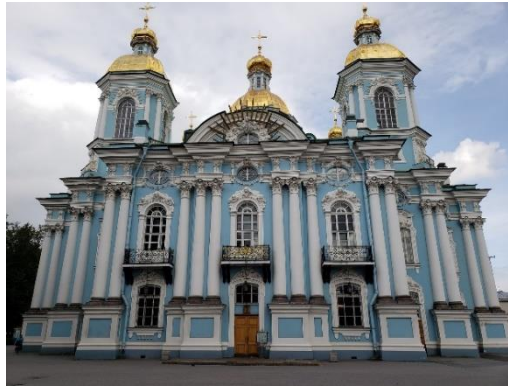
Religious Life

The St. Petersburg students reported that Russians in general feel a deep connection to the soul. There has been a big resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church since Soviet times, to some extent sanctioned and promoted by the government, as well as increased tolerance for minority faiths. For our part, we related that religion and spirituality in the U.S. was much more of a mixed bag, with a multitude of denominations and faiths, with many people increasingly leaving organized religion or at best not practicing, and with many others increasingly identifying as SBNRs (spiritual but not religious).

We saw wherever we went in Russia many, many Orthodox churches, chapels, and temples beautifully rebuilt after their destruction and suppression in Soviet times. It was clear to me that these reconstruction projects were undertaken, designed, and completed with great care, attention to artistic detail, and devotion to the underlying spiritual significance of these structures. A few examples:



Saratov Church (note the neighbor to the left)



St. Petersburg Church



Engels Chapel

The faith of the Russian people has clearly outlived the Soviet Union.

A Russian-American Cultural Difference

Sergei made what I thought was a keen observation of cultural differences between Russians and Americans. In Russia, he said, individual accomplishments are acknowledged and celebrated as accomplishments of and for the community or the nation, not as the success of one individual. It takes the support and context of a community – education, healthy environment, space for creativity and imagination to sprout, etc. – for a person to succeed at something, great or small. Even Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, is venerated in Russia not so much for what he did as an individual but as a representative of the Russian nation (or in those days the Soviet Union).

For our part, in the U.S., we point to the Horatio Alger story and pay homage to the ethos of “rugged individualism” as symbols of how far an individual can go with hard work and determination. We give attention in education and child development to nurturing a sense of self-esteem. We hold up special people as iconic “stars” to inspire us as role models. We emphasize the protection of individual rights over responsibilities of the individual to the community. (It is my personal opinion that, while the United States has a Bill of Rights, we sorely need a Bill of Responsibilities, as well!) And we see the need for special campaigns to encourage cooperation and teamwork (e.g., There is no “I” in “team”).

It’s not that either of these is wrong or better or worse than the other, Sergei stresses. It’s just, as he says, part of our respective cultural DNAs – and each may be carried to unhealthy extremes.

Of course, these may be generalizations and stereotypes. Still, it can be a healthy practice, when hearing a stereotype about oneself or one’s own culture, to introspect to see if there might not be at least a kernel of truth behind such characterizations. Further, it is always important, when trying to build mutual understanding and respect between people or nations, to be cognizant of the cultural DNA of one another as well as to realize that there is usually a wide variance from that “norm”, individual to individual.

Gorbachev

Normally, one would think I'd talk about our visit with the Soviet Union's last leader, [Mikhail Gorbachev](#), under *Politics*. However, this conversation with the ailing, 87-year-old man who changed history and won the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize touched me so deeply that it feels to me more of a human interest story than one of political history.



We met in the ground floor conference room of his [Gorbachev Foundation](#). President Gorbachev entered the room, shuffling on a cane with the aid of assistants, who helped him in and out of his seat. Nevertheless, he was strong of voice and keen of mind and memory. Sharon had asked me to stand and introduce our group and mission to him, which I did. Then, he announced that the day before he'd undergone dialysis and that the next day he would be having a surgery that "wasn't going to be fun." It seemed like he was treating this meeting as perhaps a last opportunity to say his piece and get things off his chest that he'd been keeping inside for so many years. He didn't want to stop. Whenever we seemed to be coming to a close and start to get up to thank him and say our good-byes, he would raise his hand, say "Oh, another memory," and then sit back down, as did we. Sharon said later that she'd before never seen him so open and frank in front of other groups.

President Gorbachev affirmed that the current regime in Russia wants to listen and work for peace and cooperation with the U.S. and the West and that there was a big role to play in this effort for civil society on both sides. Beyond that, he limited his recollections to his summit meetings and agreements with President Reagan during the 1980s. Mostly it was a story of the disappointments and frustrations he felt at Reagan's refusal to drop his Strategic Defense Initiative program ("Star Wars") in exchange for a comprehensive, across-the-board 50% nuclear arms reduction treaty. Instead, they did manage to agree on such reductions for only the intermediate- and short-range parts of the stockpiles. This was in itself a big deal and hardly the "failure of Reykjavík" that the Americans called that summit. But still it was a disappointment.

Gorbachev mentioned toward the end of our meeting that he's been alone almost 20 years, since the death of his wife Raisa. I remember noticing during the time of his leadership of the Soviet Union how close they were. She was always with him. It was highly unusual, even unheard of, for Soviet leaders to allow a public glimpse into their private life. And I remember how devastated he was when she died. After an hour and 45 minutes, as we at last stood to leave, Pam came up to him and showed him a book – Raisa's memoirs. He was visibly moved as he thumbed through to well-worn and bookmarked pages. At the end, he wrote something to Pam in the flyleaf – and we all posed for a group photo.



PART 3: POLITICS

My goal has been to focus on the personal rather than the political, a dream that's proven to be impossible. The best I can do is save politics for last. Or rather next to last, as I don't want to end these reflections on that note.

Following are a scattershot of observations and opinions heard both from young people, who have no recollection of Soviet times and perhaps little of the chaotic 90s, and from older folks who certainly do.

Freedom of speech and press. The worrisome thing, according to one person we met, is that authoritarian leadership and restrictions on free speech and free press seem to be increasing. On the topic of free speech and press, we visited with Vladimir Pozner, a renowned Russian print and television journalist, analyst, opinion-maker, and interviewer. His daily television program is extremely popular and watched throughout the country. Pozner was born in Paris and raised in New York City, where he became the devout New York Yankees fan that he still is. After higher education in Paris, he then returned to the Soviet Union to pursue his career.



Pozner is quite open about not being a Putin supporter, but he is nevertheless respected by both pro- and anti-Putin sides because he is scrupulous about keeping his journalism unbiased. He admits that broadcast media in Russia is pretty much state controlled, while there is much less government control over print media, primarily because not many people read newspapers. One observation he makes is that there is in fact press censorship in both our countries. In Russia, it is government censorship. In the U.S. (or the West), it is corporate censorship. On the subject of Russia-U.S. relations, Pozner feels strongly that the best way out of the escalating vituperation and distrust flying back and forth is to have massive people-to-people exchanges, especially of school children who might not yet have had their minds and hearts tainted by the government and corporate propaganda emanating from both sides of the Atlantic.

Gorbachev and Perestroika. Pozner pointed out that the USSR (i.e., Gorbachev) had agreed to withdraw their troops from, and thus control over, the Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe in exchange for a promise from the U.S. and the West to not extend NATO to Russia's borders. We made that promise, they withdrew their troops, and the Warsaw Pact and the USSR itself collapsed. And then we broke our promise. NATO pushed eastward, attempting to encircle and "contain" Russia, thus creating what Russia saw and has ever since continued to see as an existential threat right on their very borders. This has been one of the largest contributors to the distrust, animosities, and escalating conflict we are seeing today, including the crises in Ukraine and Crimea.

Another observer's opinion was that, while Perestroika held a lot of promise, Gorbachev was unable to pull it off because he was not strong enough to overcome the restraints imposed on

him from the USSR's military-industrial complex. That's the first time I've heard that term – military-industrial complex – used for any system outside the United States!

Vladimir Putin. People might not like Putin, and many don't and aren't afraid to say so, but, given the vast spatial and ethnic diversity of Russia, one young student said that there is no alternative at the moment to an authoritarian leader for holding the country together. This is especially true after the disastrous chaos of the 1990s when there was no such leader or system. While it would be preferable to have a more decentralized structure, Russia is not there yet.

Donald Trump. How did Donald Trump get elected president in the United States? I tried to explain in as serious, scholarly, and analytical a voice as I could muster about the political and historical context of the various constituencies that saw him as a savior and came together to put him in the White House. Yet it all just seemed to be not what they were looking for. I finally realized that the question was not so much *why* Trump got elected but more of *how* a country like the United States of America– heretofore considered to be a leader (or *the* leader) of the West not to mention a beacon of hope and human rights for all the world – could *do* such a thing as elect a man like that.

Battles of Ideologies. We also met in Moscow with Dmitri Babich, who has worked for over 25 years as a journalist and political analyst for numerous Russian newspapers, magazines, and TV outlets. In those years of observing and analyzing the domestic and international scene, Babich has come to the conclusion that the 20th century can be characterized as a century of ideology-based battles. The three principal ideologies he sees as vying for world dominance each contains a basic core of worthwhile values that have been then taken to unhealthy and destructive extremes. The three are: (1) Nationalism, which gave rise to Fascism and Nazism; (2) Socialism/Communism, which was subverted by the extremes of Stalinism and Maoism; and (3) Liberalism (what we might call Democratic Capitalism), which currently holds sway in the U.S. and Europe and is trending toward what Babich calls Ultra-Liberalism. The toxic danger in all of them was and has been their adherents' belief that their particular ideology (tantamount to a religion) was the only truth and that they therefore had a messianic mission to spread it to the rest of the world.

Basically, Babich has come to abhor any kind of ideology and sees the way forward as to not have any. Instead, the world would be better off replacing the currently dominant Ultra-Liberalism not with another, competing *ideology* but rather with some personal and national behaviors that reflect such relationship *values* as, for example, mutual respect, tolerance, and nonviolence.

Economics and Sanctions. A couple of the experts we met in Moscow pointed out that the domestic economy in Russia is very stable, almost flat. Inflation is at 5%, investment and growth are low, and government debt is low, largely due to conservative government economic and fiscal policies. Russia's population numbers almost 150 million, and its population growth rate is hovering right around or a tad under zero. The country's vast oil and gas reserves protect it against external economic turbulence and make Russia not so dependent on capital inflows. The challenge, though, according to these experts, is how to inject growth and dynamism into the economy, particularly one that is so dependent on only

one sector for export earnings (oil and gas) and its consequent need to diversify in anticipation of the eventual decline of that sector.

From what we saw, the U.S.-imposed sanctions are having little effect on the economy as a whole, mainly hurting businesses that rely on export markets or foreign investment. Russia has a vibrant and creatively entrepreneurial small business sector that caters largely to the domestic market, thus making the country somewhat sanction-resilient. The biggest difficulty small businesses face in getting established and growing, however, is the rampant corruption that stifles Russian ingenuity.

CONCLUSION

What I experienced in Russia far exceeded any expectations I might have had. I was left with a feeling of gratitude, admiration, and respect for the Russia and Russians that I met, the history and cultural heritage they so deeply love, and their creativity and resilience in the face of adversity. I came away with the conviction that there is indeed hope for the lessening of conflict between our nations and the fostering of mutual understanding, respect, and trust between our peoples. And it's a hope that in large part lies in the hands of young people in Russia, the U.S., and the world at large.