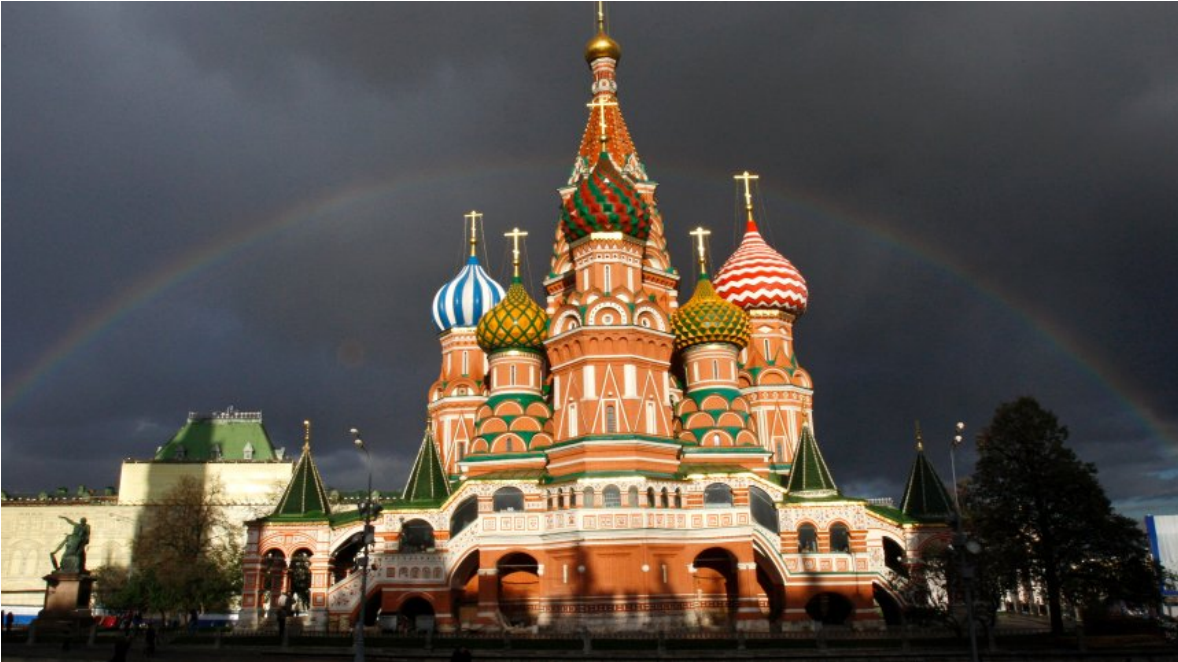


Understanding Moscow: The Mysteries of the Russian Mindset

By Christian Neef, August 22, 2017 03:54 PM



Recently, I came across a book at home that I hadn't thought about in a long time. It's called "Russia: Faces of a Torn Country." The title may not be particularly original, but it is certainly apt. The book covers Russia as it was a quarter-century ago: a kind of madhouse. The Soviet Union had just collapsed, hopes for a new beginning had proven largely illusory, ex-functionaries and cunning businessmen had seized the inheritance of the Soviet Union for themselves and were enjoying their sudden wealth as the rest of the country slid into poverty. Grandmothers stood in the wind and rain for hours at the *tolkuchkas*, flea markets, trying to sell their wedding china alongside students advertising their lovingly assembled stamp collections. Meanwhile, war raged at the periphery of the realm.

Back in 1991, everyday Russians couldn't explain what Russia represented, where it was heading politically and how all its conflicts could be resolved. We journalists, of course, couldn't either.

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All that is now history and, all things considered, Russia isn't doing so badly these days. The book mentioned above was written by me and includes profiles of 18 people trying to find their place in Russia. They were typical of the transition period: politicians and generals, businesspeople and artists, idealists, populists and criminals.

Some of them are no longer alive -- a couple were killed while others left the country or climbed up the ranks of the government. Examining the profiles from today's perspective, it isn't difficult to understand how some were left behind while others went on to have successful careers. You can also see how Russia managed to regain its footing.

One of the book's heroes is Dzhokhar Dudayev, who declared Chechnya's independence from Russia in 1991 and called for the people of the Caucasus to resist the Moscow colonizers. Russia launched a war because of him, deploying 60,000 soldiers into the small republic. Three months after I spoke with the Chechen president, his office, in which we had met, was flattened. Fifteen months after that, a Russian missile took his life. Another 15 years later, there was peace in Chechnya. As many as 160,000 people are believed to have been killed in the war. Since then, no region has attempted to secede from Russia.

Another of the book's heroes was biochemist and skin specialist Sergei Debov. He too is now dead. Debov joined the secret "Lenin Mausoleum" unit in 1952, a group of scientists that embalmed the revolutionary leader, who has been lying in state in Moscow since his death in 1924. For almost 40 years, Debov, who also embalmed Stalin, freshened up Lenin's body with a secret solution twice a week.

Then the Soviet Union and communism collapsed and President Boris Yeltsin slashed the secret unit's financing as well as the honor guard in front of the mausoleum. Lenin became a national pariah and citizen's initiatives began calling for him to be buried in a cemetery in St. Petersburg. Debov told me he was shocked: "Removing Lenin from the history of Russia -- that's unacceptable."

Nothing To Regret in Russian History?

The fact that the revolutionary leader is still displayed on Red Square 25 years later, and that Debov's successors are still at work, also helps explain how Russia found its way back to stability. The leader of the October Revolution, who, like Stalin, didn't care how many of his people were sacrificed for the communist idea, is still an important political symbol. His continued presence calms the adherents of communism, but also represents the belief among the Kremlin's leadership that there is nothing to regret in Russia's history. It's reflective of the way history is viewed in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

A third character in the book is still alive and is now 53 years old. He was born on Stalin's birthday, rose to become deputy prime minister and is today responsible for the Russian defense industry. I met Dmitry Rogozin when he was 31 years old. Just a short time earlier, he had been active with Komsomol, the youth wing of the Communist Party. He later became an ambassador to NATO and shocked the Western military with his off-the-cuff statements. We often met in Brussels.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Rogozin was placed in charge of the fate of the 25 million ethnic Russians who now lived outside the country's borders in the other former Soviet republics. He founded the Congress of Russian Communities to safeguard their interests and became a thought leader on the concept of the "Russian world" -- a world which includes all corners of the globe where Russian people live and which, according to Putin, must be defended. Rogozin is now something of a nationalist mouthpiece for the government and just recently once again described Western politicians as "scum."

The reclamation of Chechnya, the rehabilitation of Soviet history and the reinvocation of the "Russian world" -- similar to what Donald Trump is now doing in the United States under his "America First" motto -- all of that helped save young Russia. And Russian gratitude has been directed at Putin, which is reflected in the president's 80 percent approval rating.

The New Russia

The new Russia is visible in many places. A few weeks ago, I traveled through the small western Russian town of Gvardeysk, with only 13,000 inhabitants. The last time I had visited the town was in 1998, just after the great ruble crisis that brought the government to the verge of bankruptcy. The paper mill closed in the wake of that crisis, followed by the reinforced concrete factory and then the cheese factory. The heating plants no longer had any coal, and three-quarters of the inhabitants lived below the poverty line.

It was even cold in the hospital, which lacked medication and even gloves for the surgeons. The army barracks and the prison, which was located in an old castle, were running low on food. In the villages around Gvardeysk, insufficient nourishment and dirty drinking water led to cases of tuberculosis and meningitis.

Now, in 2017, the houses on the central square are freshly painted, a furniture factory has opened as has a meat processing plant and a factory for packaging material. There is a youth center and a gym. And the castle/jail is to be transformed into a tourist attraction.

If you drive eastward, of course, deep into the more rural areas, a different reality emerges, with entire villages dying. But there's no sign of the national state of emergency that paralyzed Russia two decades ago. Especially not in Moscow, which has transformed itself into a modern metropolis, with pedestrian zones, giant supermarkets, jazz clubs and avant-garde theaters, with Wi-Fi in the streets and even below-ground in the metro.

Russian Politics Lacks Feedback Loop

But there is something that hasn't changed in either the capital or in the rest of the country. I recently came across it while reading a notice in my Moscow apartment

building that symbolizes a phenomenon that has been part of Russia for centuries and that puts Putin's 80 percent approval rating into context.

The notice pertained to the announcement by the Moscow municipal government of its plan to demolish 4,500 dilapidated apartment buildings. The buildings are five-story prefabricated monstrosities, ugly and often crumbling. But around 1 million Moscow residents are affected by the plan, roughly one-twelfth of the city's overall population. And the city government has pushed ahead with its plan so ruthlessly, even shoving a relevant law through parliament at lightning speed, that a storm of indignation broke out -- even in my neighborhood, which isn't home to any of the buildings slated for demolition.

The notice in my building came from an initiative called Muscovites Against the Demolition. They argue that the plan is a disgraceful form of forced resettlement -- that it wasn't just about prefabricated high-rise buildings, but about providing real estate for the construction of profitable high-rises to construction companies with close ties to the government. Residents who refused to move would be forcibly relocated, the notice claimed, and there would be no compensation for renovations carried out by renters. Many of those who owned their apartments, the group argued, would not receive a new residence of equivalent value.

The uproar in Moscow is immense. The government, which had said it wanted to do something good for the city's inhabitants, seemed to be totally surprised by the pushback. Even Putin had to intervene and urge the Russian parliament, the Duma, to slightly modify the law, because a presidential election is scheduled for 2018 and he doesn't need protests from angry citizens.

It's a common story in Russia. Even when the leadership tries to do something good for its people, things go wrong -- because the government takes decisions on its own and then presents them to the people like a Christmas present. And because it tries to realize its projects in a Bolshevik manner. The notion that there could be objections among the people is not something that Russian politicians tend to consider.

The debate about the resettlement of those living in the apartment buildings shows yet again that there is still no feedback loop in the Russian political system. The government doesn't make any serious effort to include the people in its decision-making. Political resolutions are presented either as favors or prohibitions -- which also helps explain the new wave of protests in Moscow and other cities. The people and the government rarely come together in Russia.

Unrequited Love

Writer Viktor Erofeyev once said that it is a country of barriers and "the normal position of the barrier is 'closed.'" He also asked: "The homeland happily allows you to love her, but -- does she also love you back? Does Russia love us?" Erofeyev believes that the Russians' love for Russia isn't based on reciprocity, which is

something I've also repeatedly noticed in the past decades. But he believes that the Russians themselves are to blame -- because they don't take sufficient interest in the state.

Several months ago, I had a dispute about this with respected filmmaker and theater director Andrei Konchalovsky. He is turning 80 this year, has made some of Russia's best films and has lived in Hollywood for a long time. Despite our disagreements, we were very close to one another in our views of many things. Konchalovsky says Russians have retained the soul of a peasant over the centuries, arguing that Russians never became citizens in the true sense of the word and always positioned themselves in opposition to the state, because the government is always trying to take something away from them. At the same time, he argues, Russians are so enormously patient that they can more easily accept injustices. He also argues that Russian thinking is Manichean -- that Russians only know black and white.

And then Konchalovsky said that Putin initially thought like a Westerner, but ultimately realized why every Russian ruler struggles to lead this nation: Because its inhabitants, in accordance with an unshakable tradition, freely delegate all their power to a single person, and then wait for that power to take care of them, without doing anything themselves.

In that sense, the relationship between people and state in Russia is a vast misunderstanding. Is a foreigner allowed to say such a thing? I think so. I have been reporting on Russia for over 30 years and lived half of that time in the country. It's clear to me why the liberals associated with Boris Yeltsin failed in the 1990s. Liberalism has no chance in Russia. The people won't allow it.

The strange relationship between many Russians and their government is also manifest in myriad everyday details. Two or three years ago, Moscow's mayor tried solving the parking problem by introducing an online parking system. The charges were low, with an hour usually costing less than a euro. The problem was largely relieved and the system worked for everyone. And then what happened? Muscovites began covering their license-plate numbers so that the inspection vehicles couldn't scan the numbers as they drove, thus making it impossible for them to find any violators.

Another example: For decades, few new streets, let alone highways, have been built in Russia. But now there are plans to build a new highway between Moscow and St. Petersburg. The first stretch, which leads to Moscow's Sheremetyevo international airport, is already open. As a toll road, however, it is hardly getting used, despite the relatively low charges. Russia's drivers believe it is a government rip-off and prefer sitting in traffic jams on the old road.

Passivity and Indifference

The notion that citizens must do something for society and that they will get something back is only rarely encountered in Russia. The Russians may honor their

actors and poets far more than the Germans do theirs, but they take a skeptical view of the truly creative people, who, in their own way, try to advance the debate about the future direction of the country.

Writer Boris Akunin sells millions of books, but he lives outside the country because he can't stand his government's politics. The same is true of fellow writer Vladimir Sorokin, who was long harassed by political organizations close to the government. Internationally renowned director Kirill Serebrennikov has also been pressured, with police units recently having stormed his theater. His ballet "Nureyev" at the Bolshoi Theater was canceled three days before its premiere after having faced heavy resistance from conservative politicians. The cancellation also affected me, because I had managed to obtain one of the hard-to-get Bolshoi tickets for that evening.

Such overreach bothers only a small number of Russians. Apart from a few voices in the Moscow intelligentsia, there are no protests.

"We are a people, we love those who are similar to us, we don't need any dissimilar ones," writer Viktor Yerofeyev once stated sarcastically. A government prosecutor who frightens the people at large, he went on, is still closer to them than a reformed oligarch like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who clear-sightedly criticizes the Putin system.

Why is that, I wondered recently when I found myself in a police station in central St. Petersburg. Nowhere is it more obvious how the state seeks to make its citizens feel unimportant. The officer on duty didn't even look up when people came to him with their concerns and heavy iron doors barred the entrance to the offices. They only opened every once in a while in accordance to some inexplicable logic. In the offices, records were taken by hand. And the walls were decorated with portraits of Felix Dzerzhinsky! He was the Soviet Union's first intelligence chief, the man who set off the Red Terror and had tens of thousands of people murdered. His monument in front of Moscow's Lubyanka building was the first one to be toppled after the end of the Soviet Union -- and now the police have hung his portrait back up again?

Why do the Russians accept all of this without saying a word?

Their passivity and their indifference unpleasantly combine with fatalism and a fear of responsibility and make it impossible for most of them to get to the core of historical truths. Many are indifferent about the fact that new monuments are being built to Stalin. One Moscow journalist described it as being tantamount to Jews setting up monuments to Hitler.

The use of force by the state is also still experienced as metaphysical, as a matter of fate. Social philosopher Alexander Zipko argues that an overwhelming majority of the population still has trouble understanding that millions of people lost their lives in the Soviet Union as a result of the Red Terror.

After years of research, Denis Karagodin, a 35-year-old from the Siberian city of Tomsk, recently found out which secret service officials were responsible for

declaring his great-grandfather Stepan a Japanese spy in 1938, in order to then execute him. Armed with that information, Karagodin then filed a suit against those responsible even though they had long since died. He's the first citizen of Russia who wasn't satisfied with the authorities' formal rehabilitation notice. He wants to bring the executioners to account -- at least symbolically. But his persistence has been met with incomprehension and alienation. The argument being: You can't change anything that happened anyway.

Demagogy, Half-Truths and Lies

The things I have written about here were not invented by Vladimir Putin. He merely discovered things that already existed and factored them into his calculations. Fear of personal responsibility? Marginalization of people who think differently? Resignation to fate? Feelings of inferiority toward the rest of the world? These are traits against which the state should be acting. Instead the government strengthens them, because it is useful for it. I only realized in the last few years how much it bothers me, even among Russian friends, most of whom have now succumbed to their president's demagogy.

Putin fires up the Russians' feelings of contempt for Ukrainians, even though -- and I'm convinced of this -- the Russians are jealous that the Ukrainians will now succeed in getting closer to Europe. And he reinforces a feeling of moral and military superiority among the Russians over the West. It has little connection to reality, but isolates the state and the people more and more from the outside world. Putin is making Russia a dissident from the world order and the people are thrilled by it like it's a fairground attraction, even though for many Russians, Europe and America remain the primary reference point for their own lives.

As I said, Putin didn't invent any of this. He only learned how to masterfully exploit it and to serve this Russian mentality with demagogy, half-truths and lies. That, for me, is the most important realization 25 years after Russia's rebirth.

About Christian Neef

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Christian Neef, 65, first began serving as a foreign correspondent in Moscow in 1983. He joined DER SPIEGEL in Moscow in 1991. He would later serve as deputy foreign editor. During the past three years, he rejoined our Moscow office before retiring this month.