The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Fiddling While Russia Burns

By Alexei Pankin

August 02, 2010



On Saturday, I felt very anxious in Moscow. I hadn't felt this anxious since I was in the small town of Greenock, the crime capital of Scotland. I found myself in this port town while on a pleasure cruise of the British Isles.

The arrival of the giant cruise liner with 3,000 passengers was covered by local journalists from The Greenock Telegraph, whose photographer met us as the ship arrived at 5 a.m. Several passengers were interviewed for a four-page supplement in the paper.

This was a good reason to get acquainted with The Greenock Telegraph. The first page was taken up by a large photograph, presumably about the most important news story of the day: the exposure of a local ring of credit-card fraudsters.

A little bit further in was a story about a delegation of townspeople on their way to Glasgow to demand a ban on carrying knives, accompanied by a story about the latest knifing at a local pub. Just about every page featured a story about a crime committed the day before.

I shuddered, thinking about all the crimes occurring in this town on a daily basis.

The truth is I took up The Greenock Telegraph only at the end of the day, by which time our ship was already back on the high seas. Had I done so earlier, I simply wouldn't have dared to disembark.

I strolled through the streets (which took about 40 minutes), surveyed the outskirts with a taxi driver — who seemed like a friendly fellow to me — and chatted up locals at a pub completely oblivious to the danger that threatened my wallet and person at every moment.

"Greenock is the criminal capital of Scotland, and perhaps, of all the British Isles, including Ireland." That was the conclusion I came to after reading the local paper. (I must admit that I didn't read the local papers in other port towns we visited.)

I experienced similar anxiety at my dacha on Saturday while listening to Ekho Moskvy radio's continuous coverage of the unsanctioned demonstration on Moscow's Triumfalnaya Ploshchad. The protest was organized by the Strategy 31 opposition movement, intended to draw attention to Article 31 of the Constitution that guarantees the freedom of assembly.

Ekho Moskvy kept its listeners at the edge of their seats from well before the demonstration's start to well after its end. Based on Ekho's dramatic coverage, I imagined a massive political crisis unfolding in the capital. But as it turned out, only 200 protesters and 300 journalists took part.

While Ekho Moskvy was ruminating about the sorry state of the Constitution and its crumbling democracy, state-controlled television devoted its air time to covering the state of emergency gripping the country — the heat wave and brush fires in which more than 30 people have died and hundreds of homes have burned to the ground.

Somehow it was a relief to know that there are forces of nature far more dangerous than President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Alexei Pankin is editor of WAN-IFRA-GIPP Magazine for publishing business professionals.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/02/fiddling-while-russia-burns-a343