The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Hot Dogs, Baseball Meet Borscht, Hockey

By Andrew Squire

July 14, 2011



On the first day of his American history class at the Russian State University for the Humanities, Ivan Ivanov and his classmates had a pop quiz: What comes to mind when you think of America?

For Ivanov, a 19-year-old Kazan native with an American stepfather, it was Elvis, Washington, democracy. For his friend, it was baseball and hot dogs.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is in Washington this week to discuss the missile defense program, the Middle East and the World Trade Organization. But while both the Russian and U.S. governments have acknowledged progress in the "reset" of diplomatic relations, there is plenty of work still to be done in increasing mutual understanding between Russians and Americans. To that end, Russian businesspeople and educators are making an effort, even if the results are measured.

In February, a group of Russian businesspeople established the Society for Russian-American Rapprochement, with the goal of advising the U.S. and Russian governments on ways to promote bilateral relations and Russian-American cooperation. The group has spoken with numerous Russian government officials, and some of its members attended the annual World Russia Forum in Washington in March. But so far the organization's work has been largely informal, as it has yet to be officially registered.

Yevgeny Savostyanov, senior vice president of Sistema Mass-Media and deputy chairman of the rapprochement society, said the society's "immediate goals" include getting registered, then setting up a web site and using whatever other resources possible to publicize its mission.

Edward Lozansky, president of the American University in Moscow and founder of the World Russia Forum, said he was "a little disappointed" with the society's progress so far, but acknowledged that "they're trying."

Despite a slow start, Savostyanov said Russian government officials' reactions to his organization's ideas ranged from "cautiously positive to clearly positive."

A January poll by the Levada Center found that 28 percent of Russians hold "bad" or "very bad" feelings toward the United States, a level that has remained fairly consistent over the past decade, with the exception of a sharp spike toward the end of the Bush administration.

Savostyanov pointed to history and culture to explain the sustained animosity between the United States and Russia. "There is a profound difference in the histories, cultures and mentalities of our two peoples. At the heart of the American tradition are individualism, initiative and personal responsibility. The basis of ours is paternalism and conformity. This is the reason for the irregular and sometimes aggressive treatment of internal events, when you look at them from the other side," he said.

Troy McGrath, director of the Russian-American Center for American Studies at the Russian State University for the Humanities, or RSUH, characterized Russians' feelings as aspiring to "rivalry" rather than expressing animosity, and chalked it up to a relic of the Cold War. "Russians are still adjusting" to a different world order, he said.

Most of the truly anti-American sentiment is generated by the Russian media, McGrath added.

Ignorance Is Not Bliss

Lozansky, a Soviet dissident who moved to the United States in 1976 before returning over a decade later, offered another explanation: ignorance. He noted that Russians and Americans "don't know what's really going on" in each other's countries.

A professor and several students of American studies at RSUH supported that theory. "I have friends who think America is still full of cowboys and Marines," Ivanov said.

But RSUH has put significant effort into bridging the intercultural gap. In May, its Institute of Philology and History co-hosted with the University of Central Florida the second iteration of a biennial conference on American studies here in Moscow. The topic was "Americans in Pursuit of Their National Identity."

The university has also organized other cross-cultural programs, including one where both Russian and American students discuss the same literary texts together online. In an exchange program in May, students from Coe College in Iowa spent two weeks in Moscow touring and attending lectures.

Fifteen professors teach in the American studies program at RSUH, which was established in 1992, and about 100 students are enrolled in American studies courses. Similar programs are now common at universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and have spread around the country.

Irina Morozova, a professor of American literature at RSUH and an organizer of the May conference, said the continued interest of students in American studies has been encouraging. The program provides the opportunity to "see how our cultures are crossed and how they enrich each other," she said.

Marika Kupreyshvili, a student in the Department of International Relations, said she was drawn to study America to gain a deeper understanding of a society that many Russians know only superficially through movies. "Breaking the stereotype is impossible," she said, but with greater exposure "the attitude toward the stereotype will change."

"People's diplomacy is the main thing," Morozova said.

McGrath echoed the sentiment, noting that U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle has become well respected in Russia by promoting cooperative programs on a "person to person, nongovernmental" level.

"That's the way to get it done. That's what we're trying to do at the university," McGrath said.

Lack of Interest and Options

While Morozova praised the efforts of the University of Central Florida and some other institutions in reaching out to Russia, she criticized American universities on the whole, saying Russian-American educational integration is "not equal."

"Mutual understanding has to come from mutual desire to understand," Morozova said, adding that many schools in the United States are "squeezing" Russian studies programs or are unwilling to spend the money to start them.

But McGrath also sees issues on Russia's end. He partially attributed the lack of Russian-American exchange programs to the fact that the university system in Russia is not conducive to students taking semesters or years abroad, and said Russia's government could do more to fund students who wish to study in America, as the United States does with Fulbright and other scholarships.

McGrath, a New Jersey native who first came to Russia as a student in 1982, noted the imbalance in how Americans generally view Russia in the world, and vice versa, which has emerged since the end of the Cold War. "In the list of things Americans care about, Russia's not at the top anymore."

Russian students' interest in America is not surprising, he said, given its "omnipresent" culture and the economic opportunities that come with knowing English, but those factors do not work both ways.

Political Aspects

But some say Americans are guilty of more than indifference, and that some political rhetoric promotes an unreasonably harsh stance toward Russia.

According to the BBC World Service's annual country rating poll, released in March, 41 percent of Americans were found to have "mainly negative" views about Russia's influence in the world.

The attitude toward Russia on Capitol Hill is "very bad," Lozansky said.

Lozansky, who coordinates the annual World Russia Forum in Washington, said that "for every one event with a positive agenda" regarding Russia, "there are hundreds of others with a negative agenda." As an example, he noted a Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing last week titled "Time to Pause the Reset? Defending U.S. Interests in the Face of Russian Aggression."

The continued application of the Jackson-Vanik amendment to Russia is an example of Congress' stubborn pursuit of a "one-way street" policy toward Russia, Lozansky said.

The Society for Russian-American Rapprochement has also devoted attention to Jackson-Vanik, a 1974 U.S. federal provision intended to penalize trade with countries that have non-market economies and restrict emigration. The restriction still applies to Russia, although many argue that it has long since ceased to meet the qualifications.

Lozansky, a U.S. citizen, filed a lawsuit against President Barack Obama in April, claiming that Jackson-Vanik is illegal as applied to Russia.

"If you want a student to do better, you can't just hit him on the head every time," Lozansky said. "I don't think we shouldn't criticize Russia, but ... why do we need another enemy?"

Business as a Driving Force

Lozansky and others are looking to the business community to put a more positive face on Russia in America.

"The most important thing [for improving Russian-American relations] is business. The more successful Russians are in America and vice versa, the better," Lozansky said,

adding, "Money talks." He hopes to talk to successful American businesses in Russia and publicize their stories in the United States.

While theories may vary on why animosity exists between the countries or how best to tackle it, most agree that there is some common ground.

"Our pragmatic interests are really in conflict only in a very narrow range of issues and the potential benefits of joint, coordinated action may well be very high," Savostyanov said. He said the Society for Russian-American Rapprochement plans to launch regular videoconferences on "opportunities and challenges" of rapprochement, with topics including the Arctic as well as Afghan drug trafficking.

As for the students, they are optimistic about the future prospects of rapprochement. Kupreyshvili said she and other young Russians are inspired by the idea of the American Dream, and that "hard work can lead to success."

On Russia's behalf, Morozova added, "In my experience, when Americans come to Russia, they fall in love with it."

If an eased visa regime is finalized soon, maybe more Americans will have the chance.

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