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Q&A: HP's Mikoyan Sees Benefits of a Borderless World

By Lena Smirnova

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The descendant of Soviet elite says technology can move Russia forward. **Igor Tabakov**

Making your family proud can be a challenge. For Alexander Mikoyan, the task is one of historical significance.

Though the local general manager of information technology giant Hewlett-Packard comes with a pedigree consisting of a long list of illustrious Soviet and Russian overachievers, his upbringing and education have left him with the personal philosophy of a true global citizen, supported by his experience leading high-tech companies.

"I would probably prefer a world without borders," Mikoyan said. "For the freedom of creativity and self-expression, as well as the quality of life, I think it would be better."

Alexander Mikoyan

Education

1989-1994 — Moscow State University, bachelor's degree in mathematics 2005- Henley Management College, U.K., Master of Business Administration

Work Experience

1994-1996 — United Schmidt Institute of Physics of the Earth at the Russian Academy of Sciences, researcher
1996-2000 — Newbridge Networks Corporation Russia, general manager
2000-2004 — Alcatel, director of fixed-line and corporate clients divisions in Russia, Belarus and the Caucuses
2005-2007— Alcatel Russia, general director
2007-2009 — Thales Group, regional director of development for Eastern Europe and country corporate director for Russia
2009-Present — Hewlett-Packard Russia, general manager

Favorite book: "The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin" (1830) by Alexander Pushkin
Reading now: "The Spanish Civil War" (1982) by Antony Beevor
Favorite television series: The British classic Jeeves & Wooster (1990-1993)
Favorite restaurant: 32.05 in the Hermitage Garden at 3 Ulitsa Karetny Ryad, for its terrace, good food and nice crowd
Favorite getaway destination: Cotswolds, England, where his close friends live

Mikoyan, 40, is the great-grandson of powerful Soviet statesman Anastas Mikoyan, the only politician who managed to stay in the Politburo from Lenin to Brezhnev, and is also credited with bringing consumer goods and mass food production know-how from America to the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

His grandparents were Hero of the Soviet Union and world-famous test pilot Stepan Mikoyan and, on his father's side, Soviet prose writer Natalya Baranskaya; he is also the nephew of popular musician Stas Namin.

But while his grandfather may have a bookcase in his apartment that was a present from Josef Stalin, Mikoyan's links to history do not keep him stuck in the past. As the head of Russia's

largest foreign information technology company, where he manages more than 1,000 employees, he passionately follows the country's scientific and technological accomplishments and tracks the success and challenges of the young generation.

He is also interested in aviation and the space industry. As a young boy, Mikoyan wanted to be a pilot like his grandfather and his great-uncles, but imperfect eyesight grounded those dreams. Instead, he won a physics competition in seventh grade. After that, he was on the radar of Moscow's specialized mathematics-physics schools.

After graduation and a stint as a scientist at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Mikoyan entered the business world. His interest in technology served him well as the local head of telecommunications equipment maker Newbridge Networks. He moved to Alcatel after the two companies merged in 2000. After some time at French aerospace giant Thales Group, Mikoyan was selected to run HP Russia, making him the first locally born general manager in the company's 44 year history here.

Mikoyan said that when he was growing up he wasn't aware of the significance of his family's fame. The main benefit of being a part of a well-connected Soviet family was the interesting people he got to meet, he said in an interview with The Moscow Times. His mother, an English teacher, was friendly with many diplomatic families. His grandfather's social circle included intellectuals from the Soviet aviation forces. Mikoyan's grandparents were also friendly with Cuba's Castro brothers.

Mikoyan now spends his time with technology gurus and young specialists starting their careers in the information technology industry. And just as he easily bridges the generation gap between the venerable Soviet ancestors who gave him a famous last name and the young generation that propels his business forward, he also envisions a world of the future where global scientific cooperation is without borders.

"Maybe it's utopian, but I think that would be the right next step," he said.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How have your family connections helped you in your career?

A: When you are a child, you don't understand what family you're growing up in. Only in time do you start to realize that someone among your relatives was in one way or another famous. There is a drawback to this as well. You know that you can't let them down because they have their own reputation, and one's own deeds might affect it negatively.

Q: You have relatives abroad and you studied in a foreign university. Why did you choose to stay in Russia?

A: For an adult now, that decision is a combination of factors like your job and where your relatives live.

I sometimes think: How important is it to be attached to one country? Our feeling that the world has become truly global is not backed up by numbers. Global trade is less than domestic trade. World exchange of knowledge and data is less than internal exchanges within each country. But there are still a number of people now who think that borders are not

necessary.

I would probably prefer a world without borders even though other complications would probably emerge if that were the case. But for the freedom of creativity and self-expression, as well as the quality of life, I think it would be better.

Q: What values would you adopt from each country to make this global world?

A: I would take from England, first of all, their self-irony. I think that Russians are lacking this. If that weren't the case, life here would be different. From Western Europe, I would take the sense of freedom that we see in many countries. I am not sure that America is the freest country. I think the main examples of free countries are the Scandinavians, Denmark and even Germany — more so than America. I would take from Spain, for example, how Spain was 40 years ago a fascist country. Franco died in 1975, and within 20 years it became one of the most democratic countries in Europe. We Russians could learn a lot from this history.

I would take from Italy what they call "dolce vita," the right attitude to life. I would take from Germany their tidiness. And what attracts me in Russia is the broadness of the soul.

English society is very mature. I think we don't have enough maturity in our society in how we address different issues.

A mature society wouldn't make a law in St. Petersburg that says homosexuals can't walk down the street holding hands. It's part of somebody else's life, so why treat them like second-rate citizens? This, I think, already shows immaturity.

A mature society has a relaxed attitude about diversity of opinions, culture, religions. It treats these differences the same. A mature society offers proper debate and this debate is without outbursts.

Russian society is lagging behind in this. It is lacking freedom, but also lacking discourse that is based on objective judgment — as opposed to the subjective opinions of a few specific individuals.

Q: Why are you concerned about the state of science and education in Russia?

A: I am worried because this affects how educated the new work force is, and also because I am thinking of where my children will go to study and how competitive they will be on the international labor market.

It would be great if a Russian diploma were recognized abroad automatically. I am completely convinced that the concept of a purely Russian education, with our own ratings, where Russian schools surprisingly end up in the top positions, is not a good thing. It is necessary for us to be recognized by international ratings and try to top the list and compare ourselves to these metrics because our real competition is there. If we only live up to our own local standards and disregard the established ones in the world, we are being too complacent and hiding our real problems, which will only be aggravated in the future.

Q: What are the most effective mechanisms to help develop science here?

A: Endowments and government support. If we don't have enough money through endowments, there should be state support. When state funds are used they should be distributed by the scientific community, which can better evaluate the effectiveness of where the money goes than the government can. Moscow State University should be able to hire the best professors in the world — attract them with growth opportunities and a well-established reputation. Let us pay more to make up for the fact that Moscow's climate is worse than in California, but we should have that opportunity.

Q: What can stop the brain drain?

A: Is there a brain drain? We need to stop looking at this like a tragedy. Contemporary science is international by default and can't be nationalized unless it is some closed military topic that is researched in cities behind barbed wire.

If you're a theoretical mathematician, it is better for you to work where your colleagues are and where you can exchange ideas. You don't need anything for this. You just need a paper and pen to study mathematics, theoretical physics, and computers. So if we want to attract someone to Russia, we need to create a scientific-research-friendly atmosphere. That is the most important thing.

The right atmosphere is created through the existence of renowned schools and growth opportunities.

In the end, people live where it is comfortable for them to live. And if people are looking for better opportunities abroad, maybe the problem is not in science itself; there are probably just better chances for their growth and development somewhere else.

Q: How important is a scientist's nationality when he or she wins an international prize?

A: When scientists win prizes, their nationality should be secondary. The most important thing should be which university they are from.

Let's talk about universities, not countries. How many Nobel laureates were there at Moscow State University in the last 15 to 20 years? Let a Kazakh professor based at the Moscow State University win a prize. Or a Tajik. That would be fantastic. And it won't be important who he is, but that he works at MGU.

It is really important for the country and its education system that on its territory there are Nobel laureates. The fact that the professor is Russian or a Tajik or a Kalmyk from the steppes is completely unimportant. We tend to focus on the nationality of the professor, but we should focus on the educational institutions that work on the territory of our country.

Q: How will technology affect Russia's development?

A: Our labor productivity is almost three times lower than in America. In the future, we will have a shortage of young people; it's starting now. One of the ways to solve this is the development of information technology. Without developing information technology to drive efficiency, automation, flexibility and speed of innovation, it will be impossible for us to increase the competitiveness of Russia on the world market. Information technology will become more and more important here because it will be important for companies to use it

to replace the missing human resources.

Q: How do you see the role of foreign companies in helping Russia to develop?

A: Foreign companies bring their experience from all over the world; they can bring examples of efficient processes, right organization, right tools, including information technology. They can show how to drive innovation, even with limited budgets, in order to remain competitive. They can show how transparency and proper procedures can help to focus on the right things and deliver value from core activities.

Q: Hewlett-Packard invites students to shadow employees for a day at work. How do you evaluate the abilities and attitude of the younger generation?

A: They're energetic, free, smart young people who are ahead of us in the way they learn and try new things. They have great potential to be successful in the future.

The problem for the young generation is probably that there are a lot of career choices. The menu is very big, so it is hard for them to pick the dish they want. Plus, they make this choice without trying the job first.

The culture of working among youth, such as serving as a waitress at a restaurant, is still only developing. Another important aspect is that they might choose a field that may change very quickly, as different industries are affected by technology in different ways.

Unfortunately, when I was young there weren't really any restaurants, and those that did exist were dangerous because there were shootings there. But I think there is nothing shameful about working as a waiter or waitress. It is even useful.

You will always have to serve someone in life. Even I, as a director of Hewlett-Packard, serve someone. It looks different, of course. There are no trays, kitchens and so forth, but the meaning is still the same. You are trying to solve the clients' problems and meet their needs.

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