The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Are the Luckiest People on Earth

By Alexei Pankin

September 24, 2012



How lucky we are to live in Russia and not in the West or the East.

On Sept. 12, I attended a screening of the documentary film "Winter, Go Away!" at the Memorial human rights center. The film documents the protest rallies held last winter and was made by famed director Marina Razbezhkina at the initiative of Novaya Gazeta newspaper. I was joined by the 20-year-old son of close Russian friends. He had missed the events while studying at the London School of Economics and was hoping to gain some insights from the film.

The movie is made in a modern, impartial style without a particular bias from the filmmaker. But the pro-democratic stance of the audience members was clear. They shouted out support every time someone in the movie insulted President Vladimir Putin with exceptional virtuosity or whenever any of his supporters looked particularly foolish.

After the film, the LSE student summed up the experience by saying: "I understand that they hate Putin, but I didn't understand why, or just what they want. In England, people are more serious and responsible about politics."

"But at least Russian protesters are more reserved," I noted, recalling the rioters in Britain a year ago who rioted in several cities while protesting injustice and oppression. More than 1,000 of them are now serving prison sentences up to three years for inciting or participating in riots.

The film also contained three episodes about the Pussy Riot punk group. In one, they are shown wearing masks and multicolored clothes and speaking about their love of freedom. In another, they shout something before a church altar and kick their legs high above their heads. In the third, comic-looking Orthodox radicals outside Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow sheepishly push a few freedom-of-expression protesters by the shoulders and suggest that they all step around the corner to "have a talk."

On the same day of the screening, television news reported how militants of the newly triumphant Arab democracies had stormed Western embassies to protest the amateur U.S. video, "The Innocence of Muslims." A lively debate then ensued on the Internet as to whether the U.S. ambassador to Libya had been sexually assaulted prior to his death.

And here's another proof that our way of life in Russia is superior.

In early August, a member of the advisory board of Vokrug Sveta magazine, an official partner of the Russian Geographic Society, told me that the publication had become highly politicized after Masha Gessen stepped in as the new editor-in-chief in January. He wondered why a travel magazine should run articles on the method used for calculating the number of participants in protest rallies or that painted a psychological portrait of the State Duma. He complained that the publication was losing its traditional audience and that print run was declining faster than the market average.

Nonetheless, when Gessen was fired this month, Putin, as chairman of the Russian Geographic Society's board of trustees, personally offered to give her job back. He thereby upheld his reputation as a good man with a gentle leadership style, one for whom personal relationships with employees are more important than their professional qualifications. Gessen turned down Putin's offer.

Now, where else in the world would you find a country with so much freedom of the press and such a humane, warm and caring president to boot?

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

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