

Q&A: Horses, History Bind AmCham Chief to Russia (Video)

By [Anatoly Medetsky](#)

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When not busy promoting U.S. commerce, Rodzianko explores his roots. **Pascal Dumont**

A descendant of tsarist Russia's highest elected official, U.S.-born banker Alexis Rodzianko began speaking Russian before English.

His mastery of Russian and curiosity about the family's former homeland eventually brought him to Moscow, where he built a stellar career over the following 18 years. His work in Russia included heading the local branches of JP Morgan and Deutsche Bank— where he even experienced first-hand some high-pressure tactics related to the Yukos case.

The son of Russian migrants to the U.S. has most recently taken up the job of promoting U.S. business interests here as president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, or AmCham.

Alexis Rodzianko

Education

1973 — Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. Majored in Russian language and literature

1980 — Columbia University, New York, MBA

Work experience

2013-current — American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, president.

2010-2013 — Metropol, an investment company in Russia. Executive director

2006-2010 — Credit Suisse, Russia, managing director

2001-2006 — Deutsche Bank, Russia, CEO

1998-2001 — JP Morgan, head of Moscow representative office.

1997-1998 — JP Morgan in New York and London. Responsible for organizing local markets business in Russia.

1995-1997 — United City Bank, Moscow, CEO

1981-1995 — Manufacturers Hanover/Chemical Bank, New York. Dealing with East Europe and emerging markets.

1980-1981 — Arthur Andersen, New York. International tax practice and audit training.

1973-1979 — U.S. State Department. Interpreter, including for U.S. SALT II delegation in Geneva from 1977 to 1979.

Favorite book: Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, first published in 1866.

Reading now: Readings in Russian Civilization, Volume 2: Imperial Russia, 1700-1917. Edited by Thomas Riha.

Movie pick: Gladiator (2000), directed by Ridley Scott.

Favorite Moscow restaurant: Dorian Gray, 6/1
Kadashevskaya Naberezhnaya.

Weekend getaway destination: Tseleevo Golf
and Polo Club, situated in a forest area just 42
kilometers north of Moscow in Tseleevo
village.

But it is not only deals that have kept him here so long: A longtime polo player, he also has a responsibility for his numerous horses.

"I have gotten involved in a hobby that requires a lot of attention, money and time," he said. "I own quite a few horses. That means I cannot leave them without feeding them; that means I have to hire the people to take care of them, I have to supervise them."

That hobby is something that provided a common ground for Rodzianko and billionaire Oleg Deripaska. A project by Deripaska to build a golf and polo club in the Tseleevo village north of Moscow stuttered following the 2008 economic crisis, and only the golf course was completed. Rodzianko agreed to finish the polo fields and the stables in exchange for a 10-year lease.

One of the most important representatives of the U.S. in Russia also passes his leisure time exploring his family's history. Among the 62-year-old's best-known ancestors is his great-grandfather Mikhail Rodzyanko, chairman of the Russian Empire's State Duma from 1911 to 1917. Another senior official in the family tree was Russia's governor-general of Poland in the 19th century, Pavel Shuvalov, a relative on his mother's side. It still remains to be researched whether Rodzianko and First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov descend from the same kin.

The new AmCham president sat down with The Moscow Times in December, soon after his appointment, to talk about his life experiences.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why did you come to Russia and why have you stayed?

A: I first came to Russia for two-week stints back in the mid-1970s as an interpreter with a group of U.S. scientists and engineers during the early days of detente when the Soviet Union and the U.S. started trying to be friends by exchanging delegations in various fields. I worked with delegations on education and training; irrigation and drainage; and oil and gas.

Three years afterward, I was invited to be an interpreter on the U.S. delegation on disarmament talks in Geneva. That particular section of the disarmament talks was called SALT II, or Strategic Arms Limitation Talks II. It was about limiting the growth and size of the nuclear arsenals of the two countries.

Working on SALT II gave me a chance to save some money and to think about my future. I decided that being an interpreter was not what I wanted to do for a career. I enrolled at Columbia Business School and started there in January 1979, literally at the same time as

the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. All U.S.-Soviet exchange stopped for a long time and my friends, who were interpreters, were out of work.

I grew up in a family that had been recent arrivals to the U.S. My parents got there in 1949. I was born in 1951. I grew up in the U.S. but surrounded by Russian language conversations. I spoke Russian before I spoke English. It is part of the reason why I came to Russia — I had the language.

My father's family were refugees from Russia in 1920, at the end of the Civil War, and refugees from Germany at the end of World War II. My mother's family moved from Russia to Estonia in the early 1930s, and she went further west after World War II. My parents met in Munich.

In 1995, I got an offer from an ex-Credit Swiss executive, Hans Jorg Rudloff, who set up his own system of banks in Eastern Europe, to be his chief executive of a startup brokerage in Russia, called United City Bank, or UCB. That was when I decided to go to Russia. The decision was because all my life I had spoken Russian, gone to Russian school on Saturday morning ... and hated it. But it was my past, the history of my family. I had a chance to participate in what was happening in Russia at that time, just after the fall of the Soviet Union, in the beginning of Russia's transformation to a market economy. I did not give it much chance of success, but if I went I would never have to worry about wondering what it would have been like. So I decided, "Let me get it out of my system."

I stayed because I always had something to do next when I finished doing what I was doing. I play polo and I own quite a few horses here. I have not really wanted to liquidate that activity. I also own a few horses in the U.S.

I had played polo in other countries. In Russia, I started the hobby in 2003 when the fellow who organized the Moscow Polo Club offered me a chance to sponsor as Deutsche Bank, which we did. Afterward, I joined the club. When the owner and the partners broke apart, the owner asked me to buy the horses because he did not want to do it anymore. So, I became the owner of the Moscow Polo Club two years after it was formed. I own just more than 30 horses at the club, out of a total of 48.

Alexis Rodzienko, president of AmCham in Russia, discusses commercial ties between Russia and the U.S.

Q: When it comes to the banking business, what would you describe as the biggest change on the Russian market over past 10 years?

A: Both private and state-owned Russian banks improved their service quality, broadened access to electronic payment systems, plastic cards and noncash settlements. The Russian banking system got so stable that it was able to withstand a very serious worldwide economic and financial crisis in 2008 and 2009.

Also, Russian state banks have come to possess a competitive advantage over not just foreign banks, but also domestic private sector banks. It has become more visible certainly in the last four years, and it has become super obvious in the past weeks when the Central Bank took

away several licenses from private banks. Everybody is wondering who is next. But nobody is wondering about state-controlled Sberbank or VTB.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

A: I take a lot of inspiration from my parents. My ancestors are one of the reasons I came here. Many of them were active in Russia's history and left something behind that I can look to. Mikhail Rodzyanko, my great-grandfather, is probably one of the best known. As chairman of the imperial State Duma, he was Russia's highest elected official before the revolution. Unfortunately, he was not able to succeed in moving along his ideas of constitutional monarchy and political evolution.

I will pick a few others that are less well-known. On my mother's side, a great-great-grandfather, Count Pavel Shuvalov, was a governor-general of Poland from 1894 to 1896. He managed a very difficult job, from what I have read, with a lot of humor and intelligence. He also signed, on behalf of Russia, the Berlin Treaty of 1878 that formally recognized independence of the principalities of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, together with the autonomy of Bulgaria.

My mother's maiden name was Lopukhin.

Q: Is Pavel Shuvalov related to First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov?

A: I do not know. I am curious, though. Genealogy is a hobby of my wife, and I have done a lot of it myself. You find portraits, you find stories, materials that they have written. In a sense, I consider myself lucky that I am able to find these ancestors and that that information is not lost.

Q: What memorable problems have you faced in Russia? How did you tackle the problems and what did you learn from them?

A: Probably the most memorable problem I faced was during my time as head of Deutsche Bank when the government was attacking businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his ownership of Yukos. They were levying big tax claims against the company.

The bank held custody of assets that were, in part, beneficially owned through offshore companies by interests related to Yukos. When the tax decisions came from the government to Yukos, the company at first tried to pay them by selling all their noncore assets. One of the noncore assets was this subsidiary company called Rospan.

A newspaper carried a story that the company was going to be sold — or had been sold or would be sold — and the amount was big, almost \$1 billion. The report said that Yukos was about to turn around with that money and give it to the government for taxes. But apparently, the government's interests were not so much in collecting taxes as they were in bankrupting Yukos and taking the assets, which is what eventually happened.

The next day, a letter came to Deutsche Bank saying, "Please, arrest the shares of Rospan owned by Yukos." The problem was that the Yukos account had no Rospan shares. Rospan shares were owned by a company in Cyprus that was owned by a company in BVI. In Russia, there was nothing for us to arrest, and we wrote back saying this.

After a short exchange of letters, another one came addressed to me personally, as head of the bank, saying "Warning, if you do not do what we are asking, then you will have a criminal case against you and your company will incur fines." It was signed by the chief court marshal of Russia. He called 20 minutes after I read the letter and said in his best "Godfather" imitation, "What's the matter?" I told the marshal, "Look, I have two choices. I can close the business or I can follow your laws. What you are asking me to do is to break Russia's laws."

I told him that the transaction would be done in a different jurisdiction with different shares of different companies. He did not really understand it, but he took it onboard and said, "OK, but if we catch you taking their side against us you are in trouble." I said, "I am here not to take sides, I am here to do my job."

For six months my family and I had an open ticket in our pockets to leave Russia at a moment's notice, because a Russian jail is not a good place to be. Eventually, nothing happened, but it was a very scary moment. Everybody I asked gave me the same advice: "If you have any sense that they are coming back for any reason — to talk to you, to ask you, to put pressure on you — get out of this country as fast as you can."

I worked at a Russian bank afterwards and I told the story. Their response was, "If you had not been with Deutsche Bank you might well have been face down on the floor with a gun at your head."

The lesson is stick to the law, and it is really good to have a good "krysha," meaning a Western institution, as an employer. In the end, avoid getting in the crossfire. We were neutral. Sometimes even being neutral, you can get caught in the crossfire. But it is better to be neutral because then they might leave you alone.

Q: What are some key experiences that helped you grow?

A: Being part of disarmament talks was a real insight in the underlying factor in the relationship between the U.S. and Russia, and that factor is pretty much the same now as it was then. It was the first really serious job that I had ever had. Expectation of performance was very severe. It taught me that you have to try really hard to do a good job. It does not just happen.

A year at accounting firm Arthur Anderson taught me discipline. I was always much better at more complicated things than at simple things. Simple things like adding up 10 numbers — I could not do it because I was very bored. But if you showed me a formula that had variables, where if you moved the variables you would create a different result, I could understand that very easily and very well.

The acquired discipline has been very useful. Even the most routine tasks have to be done really well, or the result falls apart, no matter how theoretically advanced you are.

Q: What is a piece of advice that influenced your life significantly?

A: The best piece of advice I ever got was from an older banker I knew. He said, "Be careful what you promise, do not promise too much."

Q: Is there anything you cannot do but would like to learn?

A: I would like to speak Japanese. I am fascinated with their culture, their successes and failures. I like the cars. I have been to Japan three or four times. I had a chance to work with some of the Japanese partners at Metropol, whose head is also a big fan of Japan.

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