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Russia's Extended Family Is Falling Apart

By Ivan Sukhov

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The Ukrainian flag flutters among other European flags in front of a certain Greek hotel at the start of the early autumn tourist season. The hotel is brimming with Russians as well as plenty of Ukrainians. Almost all of them speak Russian, and the affable Greek waiters eagerly cater to these guests, most of whom are unable to communicate in anything but their native tongue. "Yes, of course I speak Russian," a typical waiter says in Russian. "Greece and Russia together — no America!" he adds.

It is probably rather unpleasant for the Russian-speaking Ukrainians to hear all that ingratiating nonsense about "good Russia" and "bad America," but they apparently don't know what to say or how to behave in such situations. For foreigners, the Russian language that these Ukrainians speak from birth indicates their nationality. For them, if you speak Russian, you are a Russian — period.

At issue here is not that waiters and bartenders in the warm Mediterranean countries are largely unaware of Ukraine's existence. The problem is larger than that. Despite the determined efforts made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and several other European politicians to mediate the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, many people in the West consider it

an exclusively Russian problem.

Because I am currently on vacation, I have the luxury of looking at this situation as something of an interested bystander. For example, I bought the Sept. 1 issue of Time magazine and found nothing about the Russian-Ukrainian crisis other than several readers' comments responding to an Aug. 4 article titled "Crime Without Punishment."

Readers primarily questioned how ethical it was for editors to publish shocking photos of bodies at the Malaysia Airlines crash site in Ukraine. A photo of Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin appears on another page along with a quote from him: "If you want peace, you must use peaceful means."

That is very little coverage, even taking into account the fact that Time magazine has repeatedly run major stories on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. And it is far less than Russians and Ukrainians might expect to find written on the subject. In fact, it seems more appropriate for a conflict taking place "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

One of my more respected senior colleagues pointed out that the American political scientist Samuel Huntington, in his initially very popular but now somewhat maligned book of almost 20 years ago, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," makes a surprisingly accurate prediction about worsening relations between Russia and Ukraine.

Huntington even went so far as to anticipate an armed conflict in which Russia attempts to hold Ukraine within its civilizational orbit.

Those who once laughed at Huntington might now pay a visit to Donetsk. There they can look for the imaginary line where Europe ends and Russia begins — or else, the line beyond which Europe has no interest in, other than ensuring a stable supply of gas and satisfying themselves that whoever sits in the Kremlin will not actually press the old Soviet launch button and send ballistic missiles flying.

Obviously, my friends in Kiev hope that line coincides with the Russian-Ukrainian border as it existed before the Crimean referendum on March 16, 2014.

But that is not the case. Russians have a large extended family. Despite the failures and disappointments of the post-Soviet period, Russia's extended family in Europe includes a significant part of the former Yugoslavia — primarily Serbia and Montenegro, probably Bulgaria and to some extent Greece.

Those are places where nobody would think that Russians live, but if you analyze these countries' immigration statistics, you will see that Russians have gradually come to comprise a significant percentage of their populations. Serbia and Montenegro have had a difficult time gaining recognition in the European Union's system for determining who is a "local" and who is an "outsider."

Bulgaria cannot pride itself on seamlessly integrating into the EU either — not to mention Greece, where the affirmation "Long live Russia and Greece, and forget America!" sounds frequently, even after Moscow imposed a ban on the imports of Greek agricultural products that spelled ruin for numerous Greek farmers.

And obviously, the members of this Russian extended family are happy whenever they happen to meet each other. And whether we want it or not, Ukraine — or at least a large part of it — is part of this family also. Ukraine and Russia are in conflict, but family members often quarrel. The main problem is that, apart from the immediate thrill of recognizing one another and the recognition of common everyday difficulties, there is nothing more to make it a viable family relationship.

When Russian leaders launch into their anti-Western rhetoric, they find support beyond Russia's borders. Those sentiments resonate with many in Eastern European countries as well. This, in large part, is because the West tends to show little interest in anyone or anything not directly connected with the West, and has done little to achieve real and meaningful integration with others.

The EU itself is a good example: Some member countries receive preferential treatment, some carry very little importance in the organization, and some non-member states know they will never receive an invitation to join.

But anti-Western rhetoric alone will not solve anything. Russia needs a constructive program for how it will help itself after it is done complaining about the fools over in Brussels and Washington. Currently Russia has no such program, but it does have an embargo on European agricultural products that will in no way increase love for Russia among such countries as Greece.

Even the youngest members are amazed by the way the self-styled head of that "family" addresses the others. One event that very few noticed due to the Ukrainian crisis was the six-year anniversary of Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — both of which, by the way, have openly said they want to be part of the Russian family.

Abkhazia held a presidential election on Aug. 24, and Raul Khadzhimba — whom the Kremlin had hoped would gain the post a full 10 years ago — this time emerged the winner. He met with President Vladimir Putin prior to his inauguration, and they agreed to sign a new treaty of friendship between Abkhazia and Russia. Of course, such a treaty has been in place since 2008, and the new version will differ little from the previous one. But the authorities will issue it anyway just to emphasize how good it is when the people vote for a Kremlin-supported candidate.

But in any case, it turns out that the degree of friendship between Russia and Abkhazia depends on who is currently president there. When it was outgoing President Alexander Ankvab, relations were cool. Now that it is Khadzhimba, the prospects are brighter. This episode is a perfect illustration of Russian officialdom's contempt for all institutions — sure there was a treaty, but let's toss it out and write up a new one — and the supreme importance of informal contacts between individuals.

If the new president is "one of the boys," everything will be fine and Moscow will even grant him discounts on gas, like former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych received. But if the new president — like current Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko — is not among the Kremlin's "Top 10 Favorite People," then in place of price cuts, they get war with Russia.

This manipulation of the rules while bragging about its own greatness and the insignificance

of its enemies will hardly help Moscow gather fellow family members — who have run off in all directions — under the roof of "Russian fellowship."

That roof is leaking, and the master of the house shows no signs of wanting to repair it — although, if he were seriously inclined to make improvements, many friends and neighbors would gladly come to his aid.

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