

Why My Love Affair With Russia Has Gone Sour

By [Stephen Dalziel](#)

August 26, 2015



Leonid Brezhnev was in the Kremlin and Richard Nixon was about to resign from the White House when I first arrived in the Soviet Union in July 1974. I was setting out on a life-long love affair with Russia and like the most intense and passionate affairs, it has had its moments of joy, sadness, mirth, anger, fascination and frustration.

I've spent time in the Soviet Union and Russia as a student; as a military analyst; as a journalist and as a businessman.

I witnessed the Cold War up close. I visited East Berlin and saw for myself the watch-towers, machine guns and death strips which the Soviet empire used to prevent its citizens from fleeing the socialist paradise.

And yet I've never felt more uncomfortable in Russia than I have on my most recent visits.

During the Cold War, there was an unwritten set of rules by which both sides played. Yes,

foreigners were treated with suspicion. We weren't allowed to travel more than 25 kilometers from the center of our city without obtaining another visa. (There was no such thing as "a visa for the Soviet Union" — your visa allowed you to travel only to the cities written on it, and about 90 percent of Soviet territory was closed to foreigners.) We were often the targets for criticism of Western policy.

But much of the propaganda aimed at us had an element of truth in it, as all the most effective propaganda has. There was also a strong element of humor mixed in, such as the joke about U.S. President Richard Nixon challenging Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to a run around Red Square: "TASS reports that the general secretary came a creditable second, while the president came second to last."

Nowadays there's a nasty edge to many of the comments made to foreigners in Russia. I've heard a patronizing, "Stephen, you don't understand; there's no such country as Ukraine" and "You in the West are all duped by your media," as well as "Your media is responsible for making people in the West hate Russia!"

As any Westerner living in Russia knows, it takes a great deal of patience to listen to such accusations about the Western media without responding with a serious questioning of the role of the Russian media — especially television — in stirring up mistrust and hatred of foreigners.

Today's propaganda doesn't rely on the old "element of truth" rule either. Social media and Russian television have produced downright lies, such as using images of military equipment of Soviet or Russian origin in the conflict in Syria and telling the audience that they are in Ukraine in order to "show" the horrors of the fighting there.

But while such dishonesty has one shaking one's head in frustration and disbelief that many people actually believe such dangerous nonsense, it is on a personal level that coming back to Russia now can be so difficult. There are people whom I've known for years and considered good friends whom I simply don't contact any more.

Our views on the situation in Ukraine are so far apart that it simply colors all our conversation and I'm tired of being told that "I don't understand."

Indeed, with all my Russian friends there's now an "elephant in the room" situation. We either talk about non-controversial issues such as family, or football or the weather; or we touch on Ukraine and risk ruining a friendship which has lasted for years.

It's not all doom and gloom, though. Fortunately, there are still Russians who see the madness of what is going on in Ukraine and who understand the principles of the great Russian academician, Dmitry Likhachev, whom I had the honor of interviewing in 1988.

Likhachev made a clear distinction between "patriotism" and "nationalism." He maintained that these were ideas which were directly opposed to each other. Everyone, Likhachev believed, should be a patriot: they should love their nation and their family — and this should engender in them love and respect for people of other nations and cultures.

Nationalism, on the other hand, represents a weakness in a nation and goes hand in hand with

hatred of other nations. For Likhachev, true love of one's nation was simply impossible to marry with hatred of others. Furthermore, he believed that nationalists not only hate other nations, but soon turn on those in their own society who do not share their nationalist ideas.

Unfortunately, there is an element of modern Russian society which is trying to hijack the concept of "patriotism" and make it synonymous with "nationalism." I doubt that those wearing T-shirts with the slogan "Russian Patriot" understand the true concept as described by Likhachev.

On Aug. 22, I happened upon a small demonstration near the Tretyakov Gallery in central Moscow. A group of people were holding Russian and Ukrainian flags and banners decrying the murder of Boris Nemtsov.

One woman told me that she regretted that she and others had not raised their voices 18 months ago, as this might have changed what happened and continues to happen in Ukraine. Another told me that while some people had spoken words of encouragement to them while they stood there, others had accused them of being "fascists." A clearer example of Likhachev's description of "nationalism" would be difficult to find.

For more than 40 years I've followed and been involved in the extraordinary twists and turns which Russia has been through: the stultifying boredom of Brezhnev's "era of stagnation"; the excitement and hope of Gorbachev's "glasnost" and "perestroika"; the crony capitalism and near anarchy of the 1990s; and the apparent stability yet re-emergence of mistrust and fear of the 21st century.

Russia's current international posturing and the tension in society helps nobody. There are those in Russia who seem not to care about what the rest of the world thinks about their country. It's time they started caring.

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