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# Stefan Ingvarsson's Cultural Exchange

## Talking with Sweden's peripatetic cultural counselor

By Nicole McNeilly

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Talking on the radio in Izhevsk **Facebook**

When Stefan Ingvarsson arrived in Moscow in 2015 as the new Cultural Counselor at the Embassy of Sweden, he had already taken four trips the Soviet Union and Russia, starting with high school exchanges in the 1980s. He also had a great deal of experience organizing cultural events and festivals, coming to Russia straight from his role as artistic director of the Stockholm Literature Festival. His role as cultural ambassador for Sweden was like slipping into a well-fitting glove.

Since then he has traveled the breadth and length of Russia — more than most native Russians — and organized hundreds of activities, exhibitions, performances, festivals and talks. Some of the events have been in Moscow, like last year's Faces and Laces festival in Moscow's Gorky Park. Others have been organized with Sweden's Nordic neighbors, such as bringing the Swedish-German fashion design brand Lazoschmidl to Moscow for the launch of

an unprecedented Nordic edition of the Russian "Fashion Theory" journal. Models paraded in Swedish glitter and geometric designs, Faroe Island woolen jumpers and Norwegian felt and woven knee-length dresses through the halls of the Norwegian embassy, past the keen eyes of Russian fashion buyers and journalists.

But most of his work has taken place outside the capital cities, where one of his main tasks has been to present "images — not just one image" of Sweden and show the diversity of the Swedish political debate.

"We're putting our perspective on the table," he told The Moscow Times, "so Russians can understand why we chose to do something a particular way. But because Sweden is a democracy, we don't agree on everything, and we have a lot of different visions of what our society should look like."

One of Ingvarsson's first projects was on translation, perhaps because he is himself a translator of Polish literature into Swedish. His proudest achievement has been the creation of a two-year program for beginners to Russian-Swedish literary translation.

"The translators are where you start, because without them you don't have subtitling, interpreting, translating. The real enablers of any cultural exchange are the translators."

Good translation might go some way to explain why children's literature is such a phenomenon in Russia. Far removed from the escapism of Russian children's literature, Swedish children's books are "very playful, but they are not afraid to talk about difficult subjects, like jealousy, separation or death," Ingvarsson said. "You can see this tendency coming now in Russian books." Young readers seem to appreciate this. "Whenever we visit a children's library, we hear that all their favorite books are Swedish."

Stefan estimates that he's worked in over 25 cities or regions of Russia. "The Swedish Embassy is really trying to work as much as we can in the regions. For us, it's really a dialogue with Russian society. We see Russia as our neighbor and one the countries that influences the part of the world that Sweden is in."

When Ingvarsson arrived in Moscow after the introduction of sanctions, many Russians were keen to tell Stefan why their country was misunderstood. But now, if a Muscovite tries to tell him about Russia today, he asks them where they've been.

"Most Muscovites have been to Sochi, St Petersburg and the hometown of their babushka, but apart from this, they've never seen anything... I tell them that they live in a fascinating country that they know absolutely nothing about."

"I've been so privileged," he said, "to really try to see the country in all its diversity. For example, the Volga, which you see as the center of Russia in both foreign and Russian mythology, is the least ethnically Russian part of Russia. On the Volga you travel through areas settled by Tatars, Bashkirs, Udmurtians — nationalities and cultures that have been shaped by Islam. This has been the biggest discovery for me and the greatest gift of this job."

His work outside Moscow has made him optimistic about regional development. Just as there are more horizontal transportation connections between regional cities, there are also more

horizontal connection in other spheres. “It’s what’s happening in culture; a lot of cultural institutions collaborate with each other and just ignore Moscow, which is great for their own development.”

In places like Yekaterinburg and other “cities of future Russia,” he’s been inspired by conversations with “talented 30-somethings who have decided to stay…and to change their environment” instead of moving to Moscow or abroad. There, as in other cities of Russia, he sees young people “beginning to engage with those issues that are so part of Swedish culture and debate, like livable cities, active fatherhood, recycling, inclusive opportunities.” And while optimistic that local governments appreciate that talented young specialists are staying, “if their hopes are crushed, then the future of the country will be very depressing.”

Ingvarsson hopes that strengthening cultural activity in the regional centers of Russia might also help Moscow to actively look beyond the Garden Ring Road. He and others, such as Simon Mraz of the Austrian Cultural Center, encourage support for programming in the peripheries, far from Moscow.

After so many years of travel, collaboration with local partners, and countless hours of conversation, Ingvarsson advocates a more nuanced understanding of Russia, beyond the guarded attitude of Russian specialists. But he also suggests that insight gained from exchanges with other resource-dependent countries (like Nigeria, India and Brazil) might help Russia understand itself better and perhaps even move beyond the narrow Russia and the West dichotomy that is entrenched on both sides.

But he has another suggestion. “I’m always a bit frustrated that Russia is not better at promoting its interesting culture and that it is still stuck in the ‘Golden Age’ and not really showing what it’s like today. Today’s life in Russia is really fascinating…When Russians talk so much about being misunderstood, then why aren’t they doing anything to try to show people around the world what young people in Russia are thinking, doing and creating?”

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