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A Love Letter from Russia to America

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Festivities marking U.S. Independence Day in Moscow's Kuskovo Park in 2006. **Alexander Saverkin / TASS**

We had a wonderful honeymoon. It lasted slightly more than a decade. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the sweet and scary 1990s had us both reveling in Russia's newfound innocence. The floodgates were open. Sounds, images and experts from the West flooded in. Advisors, investors, humanitarians and carpet-baggers arrived. They shared your culture, institutions and financial practices and we began to ape. Not always with success, but sometimes.

The Pepsi monopoly was broken, McDonalds showed up, Disney and CNN were on broadcast TV — along with a host of copycat American television shows. Our humor came out from underground. We could now display our sacred leaders as puppets on prime time, to mock and cuddle. Levis became freely available. Even now you can look at any street scene and see eight out of ten Russian men wearing jeans.

I made American friends while working for American companies and publications. A

generation of young people learned capitalism and corporate culture and implemented best practices as they built their own empires. We developed common interests: arms reduction, space exploration and a shared distrust of the Chinese, to name a few.

But you failed to notice something. We appeared to you as a venerable culture that had just been down on its luck for 70 years. But in fact, we were, and in some ways still are, an out-of-control hormone-pumped teenager behind the wheel who is orchestrating his own slow-motion wreck. You are the frustrated middle-aged parent, struggling to understand and manage us. Europe has been the doting grandparent, offering platitudes without discipline — while it makes a fortune off of our elites with their stolen money and high-profit business deals. This has been the world order.

Our first democratically elected leader, a goofy old politician, handed the reins of power to a serious young security officer in 1999. We love our strong men here. At first, Putin was enamored of you. When he said in the early 2000s that he saw America as our "best partner" he meant it. When he said that the break-up of the U.S.S.R. was a tragedy, he used the term literally: massive human suffering. That line was followed by a far less quoted clause: "Anyone who wants to restore it is brainless."

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Don't get me wrong. I'm not justifying his lust for power and destruction of Russia and Ukraine. I'm just sharing our perspective on a lost opportunity and the origins of the current nightmare.

Meanwhile, we, the people, were too busy spending our petro-dollars on the new comforts you taught us to enjoy as we formed a large lower-middle class. We neglected to take the time to create institutions to protect our rights. We didn't comprehend the relationship between a decent standard of living and the values necessary to maintain and grow it.

Democracy isn't something we are used to or are willing, en-masse, to fight for. The electoral system degenerated from something resembling the cheap tricks of Tamany politics in 19th century New York City to a totally rigged system. Employees of state and state-dependent companies (easily half of the electorate) go to the polls, take a selfie with their ballot and send it to the human resources manager at their place of employment… or face consequences.

Why did we let this happen? Part of the answer lies in our cynicism. For us, rights are like happiness. Something we never really expect, therefore not difficult to part with. This trait is more prevalent in the older generation. The very same elders, with personal or familial memory of World War II, will tell you the most important thing is to never let another war happen. Such thinking, it turns out now, is easily manipulated to justify why it should happen.

There are young people who feel differently. They have a thirst and understanding for freedom and peace and don't believe in tales of Western plots to destroy the fatherland. Unfortunately, they were compelled to demonstrate those values by leaving the country before and during mobilization. We are now a million citizens short. More to come (well… go). They are not cowards. They just didn't drink the Kool Aid. They don't want to kill or be killed

without reason.

They are braver than any of us for taking action. Unlike those admirable kids in Iran, Egypt and even China, after some feeble efforts at public (and illegal) dissent, instead of marching on the Kremlin, they headed for the borders. They understand how hopeless things have become here.

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Now, we're getting used to enjoying our daily routines while our country conducts a forever-war. Our boys commit atrocities. We go to the hairdresser and the health club. There is a "homefront," but it's easily ignored.

Some of us realize that our city upon a hill, our Russian exceptionalism, is tarnished in the eyes of our remaining partners and former family members. Why doesn't this happen to you? Is it due to global dependence on your currency and your market potential, or is it more about your awesome soft power? I concede that Tolstoy or Rasputin action figures are not nearly as marketable as Luke Skywalkers.

The legendary diplomat and Russia specialist Jack Matlock once said relations between the two countries are like a pendulum. They eventually swing back. But what will we look like by the time you are ready to embrace us again?

For decades, we have indisputably been the two greatest space-faring nations. Though that arena remains our last realm of cooperation, we are probably beginning to lag there, too. While you were launching your latest rocket at the moon, we were launching them at Kyiv.

Though we are both enslaved by our military-industrial complexes, our tradition of enslavement goes much deeper. While your white people oppressed another race, our nobility enslaved fellow Caucasians. This continued into the U.S.S.R., with the Communist elite the new masters. Now we toil under the yoke of kleptocrats.

The resulting generational PTSD, which manifests itself in a sense of total disempowerment, is one of the reasons we don't resist. We are a divided house, too. We just have no coping mechanisms like transparency, free speech or public self-deprecation.

Ironically, self-loathing, a corollary of the slave mentality, leads to the kind of arrogance spewing from the mouths of our state-funded pundits — the ultimate PR team for the pigs in the house. Such conceit is a luxury and makes it easy to shed values and hurt others — peaceful neighboring countries as well as our own people.

Despite what Dostoyevsky wrote, we are no longer hung up on introspection. We have become a nation of ostriches run by a few lunatics and their equally deranged minority of supporters.

The author is a Russian citizen.

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