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Can you follow Russia through media alone?

Inscrutable Russia?

The heading of my talk is deliberately vague. Obviously, there is no way one can follow the life and politics of Russia solely through the media, but on closer inspection, you notice that, yes, you can learn a lot just through the modern Russian media.

My premise is that Russia is neither inscrutable nor mysterious. I am in full agreement with my friend Alexei Mordashov, who told Finnish business leaders he has yet to discover the elusive “Russian soul”, among his more than 150 000 employees.

Russians are not solely responsible for perpetuating the myth of Russian mystery. Churchill’s October 1939 observation that Russia is **a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma** is routinely cited in the West to suggest the unknowability of Russia. But here’s the full quote: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.” That’s a bit different.

Still, when it comes to myth-making, some Russians cannot resist quoting the great Russian poet Fyodor Tyuchev, who alleged you cannot understand Russia, you just have to believe in it. *“Умом Россию не понять, /Аршином общим не измерить: /У ней особенная стать - /В Россию можно только верить.”*

The claim is preposterous, of course. Russia is a normal country. It may not be like other countries; it is vast, complicated and not always easy to deal with; but even as a foreigner, you have reasonable opportunities to break the code and develop a feeling for how Russians tick and – and this is very important – understand what is genuine and what is not. Many moons ago, an American professor taught me that no student of the Soviet Union can avoid doses of disinformation. That was inevitable. The big danger was artificial analysis. Times have changed, but nobody

should claim to understand Russia without honest effort to penetrate and come to grips with its rich culture.

It is doable and, I assure you, quite rewarding.

Newspapers then and now

As a former diplomat and avid reader of newspapers, I know from experience that the systematic study of national newspapers allows one to relatively quickly form a picture of the burning issues and problems of that country and understand how it sees its own past; a view, mind you, not necessarily shared with the outside world. I did this as a student in France, and during my years in Germany and America. For many years, it was possible to discern the critical issues in the US just by carefully reading one newspaper – the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* is still a good paper, but the “Gray Lady” alone is no longer enough to understand America.

The Internet has changed the world, but the basic tenet remains the same. A systematic study of the national media is the prerequisite to understanding what is going on in a country. I am convinced that holds for Russia, too. The changes in Russian media from Soviet times are, to say the least, astonishing.

A young Vice-Consul in Leningrad

Let me share with you a story from our time in Leningrad. I believe it was 1977 and late May or early June. I was the Vice-Consul at the Finnish Consulate General. Although we had plenty of work to do, there was ample time to enjoy the city and read.

We were barely thirty, but we lived in a 200-square-meter apartment on Chernishesvskogo. We had a Finnish nanny for our baby daughter and a Russian maid. (By the way, our last guest was the young and brilliant rector of the Theological Academy of the *Nevskaya Lavra* – Kirill; we are of the same age.)

I was young and ambitious, so I made an effort to read all the newspapers published in the North West of the Soviet Union, which was our consular district. Most of the stuff was reprinted from the central press, but there was always something interesting for a Vice-Consul. When I came home one evening, my wife greeted me with news that they had called from the shop – the special shop that catered for the Leningrad party elite and the small consular corps (there were twelve consulates at that time in Leningrad). They had called and offered us strawberries. I pulled the *Vecherny Leningrad* from my briefcase and read to my wife the news of the day: “The first strawberries have arrived in *gorod geroi* Leningrad and will soon be delivered to the kindergartens of the city.”

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Let's put that news about strawberry arrival in today's context. A skeptical Russian today would immediately ask himself whether he can trust the source of the information – the newspaper, the blogger, the editor, or the TV reporter. For him, determining the reliability of information is the first question, because that is the key to everything that follows.

Chernobyl and the BBC

I had a second transformative experience with my understanding of media in late April 1986. At that time, I was posted in Brussels at the Finnish Embassy but we were in Paris staying with a colleague. When we came down for breakfast, my friend broke the news of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. We immediately left for Brussels. As my wife drove, I fiddled with the radio and listened to different newscasts. Mind you, this was the time before satellite TV, Internet and mobile phones! We were deeply worried, the children were in Brussels and we had absolutely no news from Finland. The French news claimed that a thousand people had already died in the catastrophe and more wild reports followed. Yet through all this, the BBC repeated – and I will never forget this – “the confirmed number of deaths is two.”

That, for me, was the formative experience in understanding responsible reporting. In a situation where the information coming through was very sketchy and the secretive Soviet authorities were themselves in denial, it was highly unprofessional, unethical and irresponsible to incite panic.

Russian Media with nuances

Although I remain a frequent visitor, I do not live in Russia today. I am not an expert on modern Russian media, nor am I an expert on the blogosphere generally. Fortunately, I have daughters and sons-in-law to coach me on Twitter and Facebook. But I can assure you that reading the Russian press and occasional blogs is most interesting. I am constantly surprised by the quality of the better newspapers. Russian economic reporting is first rate, and Russian statistical data are considered reliable. It is evident that both the IPOs of the past decade as well as the ongoing restructuring of corporate debt have helped enhance transparency, which is critical as Russian businesses integrate with the global economy. The contrast with political reporting is stark, but that is Russia!

A well-kept secret among expats living in Moscow and St. Petersburg are the daily *Moscow Times* and *St. Petersburg Times* published by Independent Media, which is part of the Finnish Sanoma Group. Independent Media also publishes *Vedomosti* and a number of highly popular magazines. The secret of the *St. Petersburg* and *Moscow Times* is very simple – give the readership a serious source of news and commentary in English. Check

for yourselves, foreign residents and occasional visitors, even those who know Russian, start their day reading the *Moscow Times*, a publication most Russian officials have never heard of.

It is not my intention here to discuss Russian media in general or TV in particular. My wife and I love old Soviet films, too – my absolute favorite is “*Svinarka i pastukh*,” the story about a blond bombshell *kolkhoznitsa* who tends pigs and a gangly shepherd, a *dzhigit*, from the Caucasus mountains, who rides directly into her heart. We occasionally enjoy Mikhail Galkin’s shows, especially his impersonations, but I would lie to you if I told you I am a fan of Josef Kobzon and the Ensemble of the Ministry of the Interior.

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Historical truth and myths

Let me instead ask: What is true, what historical truth can we believe, and how do we determine this truth? Some of you no doubt still remember a sarcastic pun from the Gorbachov *glasnost* years. Little Vova comes home from school and exclaims to his father, “Do you know what the teacher told us today? **Glass** is made out sand!”

We all remember the old line about the “glorious Soviet future and its uncertain past.” But manipulation of history is not only a Soviet sin. My favorite example of historical distortion is the myth of Lenin granting Finland its independence. The facts are as follows: With the Bolshevik coup (*perevorot*) of October 1917, the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, a parliamentary democracy, had no choice other than to sever its ties to Soviet Russia. The Finnish Government (*senat*) declared independence, but was advised by Germany and Entente to attain recognition from Petrograd before these powers were ready to recognize Finland’s independence. On the December 31, 1917, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin *et alia* signed the decree recognizing Finland’s independence. Four weeks later, civil war broke out in Finland. Lenin backed the Red Guards and Mannerheim commanded the White troops supported by the Germans. General Mannerheim and his white Army entered Helsinki in triumph in May 1918.

This was the only part of the Civil War in the former Russian Empire that ended in a victory for the Whites. “Reds” and “Whites” were terms used in Finland even before the civil war in Russia started.

Forty years later, 1957 President Urho Kekkonen of Finland unveiled a commemorative plaque in the Smolny in Leningrad thanking Lenin for Finnish independence. Kekkonen promoted this myth in order to impress Khrushchev and later Brezhnev about this “sacred gift of Lenin.” The most astonishing thing about this historical fabrication was that it worked even better than the clever Kekkonen ever hoped.

Obviously, it is important what a president says and his interpretation of history. But presidential words are only one of many sources a historian must weigh in creating a synthesis that accurately reflects events. Statesmen can make history, but history is not written by politicians. History emerges through the free and independent intercourse of academic historians. It is constantly undergoing revision. Every generation presents its own views and analysis as new facts come to light and fresh insights are gained.

For me, this same rule applies to media. There is no one truth, nor are there eternal truths. There is only the free exchange of information and opinions that forms the basis of our understanding. It is up to the journalist and the media to present the results.

Independent, high-quality journalism is a tall order, but in my view, it is the only way to rein in chaos and secure balanced scrutiny. The appearance of new media, especially the explosion of the blogosphere, has not changed the need for quality. Quite the contrary, it has also made control of the media much more difficult, which probably is something positive.

The hard core of Finno-Russian relations

Two weeks ago we commemorated the 70th anniversary of the Soviet attack on Finland – the start of a Winter War lasting 105 days. As part of the remembrance, Finnish and Russian historians published a book with declassified material from NKVD archives. The published texts throw light on the situation at the front, the mood of the soldiers, and reactions among the civilian population. A large part of the material consists of Beria's spot reports to Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov. Cf. the article by the Head of FSB archives V.S. Khristoforov (*Начальник Управления регистрации и архивных фондов ФСБ России*) published in *Vremya Novostei*, November 30, 2009¹.

This politically significant event is yet another sign that Russia today can look at its own past with new eyes. I admit that it is easier when it comes to Finland than in many cases, but nevertheless the Winter War remains the hard core of Finno-Russian relations for a simple fact: Finland said no to Stalin and got away with it.

The rest is history.

¹ <http://vremya.ru/2009/220/13/242756.html>