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Reflections on Russia

I've passed several weeks in Russia this autumn, a country dramatically changed since my first visit in 1976. (self disclosure: my ethnic origins are Polish and Lithuanian; family members have suffered, been sent to Siberia under Soviet and Russian influence. I visit with some anxiety). Yet, this is an extraordinary country. We visited from St Petersburg to the Urals. We were hosted in homes ranging from basic to upwardly mobile middle class. Given the vastness of the country, this was like an aperitif. Everywhere, we were graciously welcomed, genuine hospitality. Here are some reflections from conversations and take aways. This is very incomplete, but some important elements to understand Russia today.

This is a country rich in history; its founding in 862 in Novgorod by Swedes, its acceptance of Orthodox Christianity in Kiev through the conversion of Prince Vladimir; numerous invasions leading to the establishment of Moscow as capital in 1328, replaced in 1713 by St Petersburg by Peter the Great and in 1918 finally established in Moscow by Lenin midst The Bolshevik Revolution. Over the centuries, Czars Ivan the Terrible and Ivan the Great, rapacious in acquiring territory, basically established the Russian Empire, its size covering 1/6 of the earth's mass by the 20th century. With WWI, the Empire broke apart and under Stalin, in the 20th century, it was divided into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, dissolved in 1991 by Gorbachev. Elections have followed, with limited access. Although the country extends into Asia, the majority of the population is based in its European territory.

Many surprises. First, the general well-being of the population we encountered. Supermarkets were filled everywhere we travelled. The streets, highways were clogged with up to date, late model cars. Restaurants were filled. Almost without exception, Vladimir Putin was praised. His strong control of the country, like the Czars of old, seemed absolute. The Soviet collapse and dismemberment of the USSR in 1991 was followed by a period of chaos, financial distress and crime. Then President Yeltsin seemed unable to foster a smooth democratic process. Putin's KGB organizational skills along with a bonanza of cash from the high oil prices allowed him to foster a middle class and a rising standard of living. As the price of oil dropped and Russia's relationship with Ukraine soured, Putin invaded and annexed Crimea, while sending in "green men" without identification into Eastern Ukraine to unsettle the country. The EU and the US followed with sanctions. The economic suffering resulting from the sanctions and low oil price seems to be stoically accepted. A strong spirit of nationalism pervades life. I noted the stamina of literally thousands of men and women shoveling snow daily, often with flat wooden makeshift shovels in addition to multiple ploughs moving through the main thoroughfares. In visiting very basic apartments, families spoke of "toughing it out". This is a country where invasions, the Mongol Golden Hordes, the Tatars, Napoleon and the Nazis have been resisted, resisted for "Mother Russia". The media, especially TV (very one sided we were told) and cultural events foster this affirmation of pride in Russia. This seems enhanced by a description of history that took my breath away, being fake propaganda. Educated individuals were convinced, for example that "Russia never invaded Poland, but only occupied it at the request of the country's leaders" or "the Baltic countries welcomed Russia as protector". Yes, pride in the victory of Russia in the Great Patriotic War (WW II). Pride in adding the territory of the Crimea; pride in the outreach in Syria, pride in resisting the West, source of Russia's geo-economic problems, pride in Russia once more seen as a global player. The dark side seemed forgotten.

Few individuals seemed to complain of their situation. Of course, every one was aware of high profile disappearances, detentions and deaths of those who publicly speak out against the government (eg 34 journalists murdered in Russia since 2000). Staying near the beautiful St Isaac's Cathedral in Petersburg, we were astonished to note that given a beautiful sound and light show to commemorate Russia's National Day of Unity, people were not allowed to congregate. We were told that since the protests at the time of Putin's reelection, all unauthorized gatherings were scorned upon. Perhaps an awareness of the Arab Spring toppling dictators. Heavy security presence was obvious to us as each time we walked into a hotel, taking the train where there were cameras in each car and groups of 4 police walking in each subway station. My passport was examined with a magnifying glass.

Another surprise was the role of the Orthodox Church in Russia. Under the atheist orientation of Communism, churches and monasteries were closed, used as gyms, swimming pools, museums, movie theaters or simply knocked down as the principal Cathedral of Moscow. This Cathedral Christ the Savior has been rebuilt, duplicating its former glory stone for stone, icon for icon. Throughout the country, monasteries and churches have been restored in abundant gold leaf, both inside and out. Small groups of men and women are repopulating the monasteries and convents. Services are ongoing, even in rural monasteries. Visiting the 16th century Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan in St Petersburg on a cold, snowy day, we found ourselves jostling for breathing space to move midst the large devotional crowd. Salaries of the clergy are paid by the government. In a picture widely displayed of President Putin and the Patriarch Kirill embracing, the Patriarch is quoted as saying: "I cannot imagine Russia without President Putin". Indeed, far from the days of national atheism, institutional religion and national government today seem cemented in supporting one another's official policies. There is a conviction that Rome having fallen to the Vandals, Constantinople to Islam, Russia with Moscow is the true guardian of Christian orthodoxy.

With the announcing of Donald Trump's election, the Russian parliament stood and cheered. Taxi drivers, guides, ordinary citizens we met seemed pleased that America would have a strong leader who would support President Putin. This is a story yet to be written.

I conclude with two hopeful memories and some anxiety. Arriving for lunch with a study group in Moscow on July 4th, 1976, midst the "cold war" I remember a wonderful welcome, US flags draping our dining table, kindness in abundance. This visit, through the kindness of the Russian Secretary General of the United Nations Association, Alexei Borisov, I was invited to give a talk to students majoring in international studies at the University in Kazan on "Nationalism and Globalization". Warmly welcomed by the President, given the key to the city, hours of dialogue and exchange followed. The take away: the politics may be very challenging, but the human spirit can overcome all kinds of barriers. My hope is that we will find a way forward. My anxiety is that Putin and Trump may overlook and denigrate the work done to allow Europe years of peace while creating a Yalta style agreement. These are the times of crisis and opportunity.

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