



iLine

Volume 14 (361)
November 2015



FEAR

A GLANCE INTO THE FREAK

Editorial

You know the feeling. You walk into the metro, headphones in, head down, sullen face; you didn't mean to, but you look up to a numbing scene — a couple kissing, someone toting the designer jacket you can no longer afford, an encrypted cyrillic text you're supposed to understand. You look back down, ignoring the dirty lump passing for a homeless guy on the floor, and you reach for your phone. You just want to re-connect to a pleasing reality, but your phone smirks a "piss off" just before shutting down to low battery.

No escape.

You are stuck with only one alternative, you have to look back up at a scene you'd rather avoid.

A glance into anxiety, dread and panic as you walk to the metro can be as regular as our daily routine. We find these feelings riddled throughout our society in what we consider to be cultural norms and taboos. We even order them at the bar — like a cocktail of excitement and vulnerability we slam down drinking to the unknown.

Subconsciously, we obsess about them:

I have no idea how my son will survive in Britain (page 7)

I can only see grey (page 9)

I am missing a big part of my heart (page 12)

I am lost (page 14)

Agitating thoughts like these dwell in our subconscious, like bumbling trolls waiting to wreak havoc whenever they're provoked. The culture that surrounds our fears and doubts perpetuates an intangible feeling of not being able to control and act

upon them.

But should we act upon them?

And if so, how do we approach them without sacrificing our sanity?

The bad news is, you can't always circumvent the weight of these feelings. They're heavy and cumbersome. Transforming confusion, distress, worry, doubt and anxiety into something tangible and meaningful is far from simple self-reflection. The good news is, it's not an impossible task. The balance is to shift your internal self-doubt to an external perspective that's manageable — like a humble call to action.

By glancing up and outward, instead down and inward, we begin the process of attaining the thing we want the most: a lover, safety, a social life, acceptance, security, expression, and to be remembered. By glancing outward, you take a longer look into the freak that ignites your seemingly impervious emotions.

As students, introverts, rebels, failures, professionals, and everything in between, we can all recall a moment where we looked up and saw something we didn't mean to. Instead of turning away, we can turn the page to a more meaningful look at why an agitating metro scene can indeed, be our best alternative.



Catherine Barney *Still afraid to say "Hello!" and "Goodbye!" in Russian.*



Front cover and above photo by D. Hjorth.

IN THIS ISSUE

Elephant in the Room: HIV in Russia	03
Goodbye Journalists, Translators and Lawyers	04
Curbing China, Russia's Asian Enthusiasm	05
Facebook Changes the Game	06
Real People, Unruly Rouble	07
State of Fear	07
Breaking the Silence	08
Street Art: Between Art and Vandalism	09
Russian Women's Pursuit of Happiness	10
St. Petersburg: Window to the West?	11
Never Lose Your Roots: Muslims in St. Petersburg	12
Prostitution Regulations Worldwide, Then and Now	13
Mysterious Places in St. Petersburg	14
Letter From an Unknown Culture	16

HOW TO NEVER LEAVE THE HOUSE

A handbook of Russian superstitions.

Russian superstitions are strange, funny, and although they are well documented, the topic remains a favourite for satire. The explanation is very simple: there are a lot of superstitions in Russia.

So many, actually, that one cannot delve through all of them in just one go. If a **black cat** crosses your path, your day will be filled with bad luck. Don't offer someone an even number of flowers. Well, that is unless said person happens to be dead.

We bring you a compilation of Russian superstitions and the one universal solution on how to shoo away bad luck using wood, saliva, and a mirror.

Don't be afraid when a **black cat** comes into sight while you're going through this paper.



Nicole Akakpo *I wrote an article on superstitions but I am not superstitious. Superstitions are for sissies!*

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE



Here are a few recommendations to take you through the most important stages of life. For no other reason than this: growing up is hard and you will need all the help you can get!

On Marriage

A bride should never wear open-toe shoes at her wedding because all of her blessings will leak through the slit.

On Having Children

No gifts before the baby is born. Women should not cut their hair throughout the pregnancy, but nobody really knows why. Finally, complimenting newborn babies may put them in the spotlight of evil forces. Don't do it. No one wants to harm an innocent child!

On Life and Death

It bodes well for a wedding party to encounter a funeral procession. Indeed, who can argue that for new things to bloom, old things must die.

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: HIV IN RUSSIA

After years of denials and disinformation the Russian government can no longer ignore the gravity of its HIV crisis; a problem once confined to society's margins now affects about one in every 100 Russians.



Used syringes collected in one of the Humanitarian Action buses in a day.

Photo credit: F. Visser

The fall of the Soviet Union and the accompanying social and political upheaval was characterised by years of often painful adjustment to the new reality. The restructuring of Russia's state-owned economy as a privatised, capitalistic system led to runaway inflation and unemployment; homelessness and drug abuse soared as many ordinary Russians were left without jobs or social protections.

Rampant intravenous drug use resulted in an explosion of HIV, transmitted mainly through the sharing of contaminated needles. However, as the disease was initially confined to sex workers, drug users, homosexuals, and other marginalised or stigmatised groups, the government made little effort to stem the tide of the budding epidemic.

EPIDEMIC

Twenty-eight years after the first case of HIV was reported in the Russian Federation, the epidemic is still surging. Inefficient methods of prevention and limited availability of treatment has allowed the virus to spread from marginalised groups to the general population. Human Rights Watch warns that Russia now has one of the fastest growing infection rates in the world.

People think that HIV is not something that can possibly concern them; the virus is still demonised, believed to affect only homosexuals, junkies and prostitutes. But this is no longer the case.

"Most of the cases nowadays are discovered by chance", said Marina Akulova, a medical specialist from the Humanitarian Action Fund (HAF), one of Russia's leading AIDS services.

"People discover that they have HIV before a surgery, when pregnant, or when donating blood, a sure indicator that the virus is now spreading through the general population," Akulova added.

In addition to harm reduction programmes, such as syringe exchanges and psychological counselling, Humanitarian Action provides free screening for the general population. One such screening was held on Vasilievsky Island in St. Petersburg, at the end of October. 330 people participated but many others declined.

"People think that HIV is not something that can possibly concern them; the virus is still demonised, believed to affect only homosexuals, junkies and prostitutes. But this is no longer the case," Aleksander Tsekhanovich, a member of the HAF board, said.

This year, for the first time, sexual contact has overtaken the sharing of contaminated needles as the primary means of transmission in St. Petersburg. Despite this, the persistence of conservative policies means that discussion of contraception and disease transmission is still taboo in Russian schools.

DENIAL

Raising awareness of HIV is complicated by the fact that the virus is not only stigmatised but often simply denied. When the epidemic first hit Russia at the end of the '90s, a movement of HIV deniers formed. They not only believed that HIV is a myth, but also believed that antiretroviral medication was the cause of many deaths. On VK, HIV dissidents have formed a community called "HIV-AIDS – the greatest mystification of XX century". The group boasts more than 14,000 members.

HIV deniers are often carriers of the virus themselves, jeopardising not only their own health but also that of their partners and/or children. The case of Maksim Markelov is one such example.

Despite the fact that he had no medical knowledge, he persuaded his wife to refuse antiretroviral treatment after she was diagnosed with HIV. When their child was diagnosed with the illness, they did not allow doctors to treat him. Their child later died from HIV-related complications.

Only last month, Russia's Health Minister Veronika Skvortsova has, for the first time, openly acknowledged the epidemic. She said that Russia now has almost 1 million registered patients with HIV. The acknowledgment is long overdue: Skvortsova went on to note that the current state of funding permits the country to treat only 200,000 patients, a mere 23 percent of the HIV-infected population.

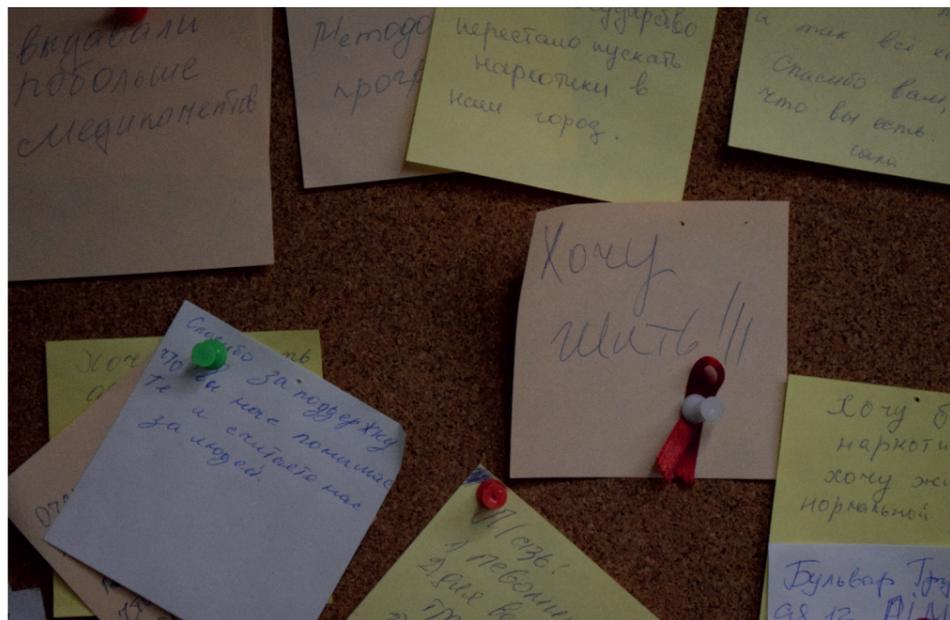
TREATMENT

Shortage of medication and weak preventive measures have contributed to the spread of the epidemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends starting antiretroviral treatment as soon as the HIV virus is diagnosed. Antiretroviral treatment keeps the level of HIV in the body low, reducing the chance of transmission and preventing its development into AIDS. Without treatment, people living with HIV are more vulnerable to illnesses and infections because of the damage HIV does to the immune system.

In contrast with many other countries and against the recommendations of the WHO, Russia does not provide antiretroviral treatment to drug users.

Moreover, medication is limited to patients whose CD4 cell count falls below 350 cells/mm³. CD4 cell levels of a healthy person range between 500 and 1500 cells/mm³. Low levels of immune cells leave the body exposed to tuberculosis, pneumonia

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Post-Its in a Humanitarian Action bus express gratitude to the volunteers and their wishes for the future. The one on the right says "I want to live!"

Photo credit: F. Visser

and other opportunistic diseases.

Drug addicts continue to make up a significant number of the general population; the city of St. Petersburg approximates that there are 30,000 heroin addicts. According to a recent study by the HAF, 50 percent of drug addicts are estimated to be infected with HIV. For these victims, getting antiretroviral treatment is particularly difficult. To receive treatment, they have to go through rehabilitation centres most of which are funded and controlled by churches. Cases of successful rehabilitation are rare.

“One-third of the drug addicts will never quit drugs because of the very nature of their addiction and the first thing these people need to stop is a substitution for heroin,” said Aleksander Tsekhnovich.

FORCED ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The rate of heroin addiction has been successfully reduced in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia with the introduction of methadone in rehabilitation centres as a substitution for heroin. One of the advantages of methadone is that it is taken orally, reducing the risk of spreading HIV. In Russia, methadone is still banned and rehabilitation centres do not offer any substitution for heroin, complicating the rehabilitation process.

Programmes meant to help drug addicts are disappearing rather than expanding. “At the beginning of the year 2000, Russia counted 87 harm reduction programmes scattered around the country; these programmes have been reduced to 14 in recent years due to a lack of funds,”

said Akulova.

For years, the HIV virus has been associated with the stigma of attacking only drug users, homosexuals and prostitutes; three groups that have been infamously held in low esteem in Russia.

Years of denial have resulted in ineffective measures being taken to combat the spread of the virus. The government has now been forced to acknowledge the problem: and as any recovering drug addict will tell you, the first step to treating a problem is acknowledging that you have one.



Francesca Visser is afraid of deadlines and cholesterol.

FOR ANIMAL LOVERS

Spider and Bird Droppings

Though crossing a black cat is a bad omen in Russia, animals can also turn your day around for the better. Spiders for instance, these multi-legged frightful creatures, are believed to bring good news. Similarly, the unfortunate experience of receiving bird droppings turns out to bring good luck. So here's to always looking at the positive side of things!



GOODBYE JOURNALISTS, TRANSLATORS & LAWYERS

In 2015, Skolvoko Moscow School of Management published “The Atlas of Emerging Jobs” which ranks journalists, translators, and lawyers among the most endangered jobs after 2020. So buckle-up, students: the top three university majors that can make you unemployable within the next five years.

In the summer 2015, St. Petersburg State University welcomed over 2,000 applications for bachelor degrees in media, PR and communications, nearly 1,900 for law and over 1,700 for linguistics. The data show the popularity for “soft” majors but cause some head-scratching questions: Will we have a surplus of social scientists in the next decade? And what if Skolkovo's predictions come true? Does anyone fear the idea that machines could rob humans of their work?

THE “TOUGH” TIMES

In January 2015, Associated Press published their first fully generated story by an automated system. Since then, “robot journalists” have become a piece of hardware, a nail in the coffin of the media industry. Popular blogs fuel the debate, competing with well-established print and online media. Luckily, with emergence of “info stylists” and “content aggregators” by 2020, so-called old school feature writers can actually stay on.

Polina Isaeva, Student

First-year student at the School of Journalism, and an already published author, Polina feels like trying something new, instead of poetry and fiction.

“In my experience in writing long reads, I can assure you, that they always have to have a strong human touch. A journalist explores a question deeply, draws multiple opinions, looks at a matter from inside out, and brings in a skilled photographer to communicate the message. It is a huge amount of work and it falls entirely on a single journalist. I doubt that computer-generated text will



Skolvoko Moscow School of Management

Photo credit: A-B Studio, LTD

ever be that good to impress readers.”

As romantically-minded as an 18-year-old can be, Polina claims: “We need to love journalism at our hearts, not ourselves at the heart of journalism.”

Sabina Nadzharova, Student

As a first-year student, Sabina picked media over medicine with no regrets and no fear of the declining media industry. In her mind the same goes for books: “Today we are packed with gadgets and eBooks, but print versions are still doing pretty well.”

Already three months into the semester, she already knows how flexible journalists have to be: “In two years I will be concentrating on media design, which is always up-to-date. Robots can generate business news with clichés, but they won't replace a great deal of human work. Original creativity still matters.”

Anna Shcherbakova, Vedomosti Editor-in-Chief

“I tend to believe in the evolution of journalism, rather than its extinction. Some jobs are highly susceptible to automation, like traffic reporters on Yandex. But readers are searching for something more than just traffic jams. They want insights from the areas where computers and robots cannot encroach.”

HUMAN vs ONLINE TRANSLATOR

When American fast food giant KFC first opened in China, they accidentally translated the slogan “Finger lickin' good” to “We'll eat your fingers off!” in Chinese. This blunder is a perfect example of a literal translation. But “as automated translation software is developing, humans remain only in truly specialised area, like literary translation,” warns Skolkovo.

Valeria Shilova, Student

A first year master student, Valeria did her bachelors in Computer Linguistics – equipping her with the programming and language skills needed to work on translation systems and online dictionaries. But many employers show ignorance to what computer linguistics is. They just needed a plain translator.

We all have fear of ending up at a language company translating Personal Income Certificates for the rest of our lives.

“I want to become a professional translator with concentration in movies and fiction literature. One of our teachers has translated a great deal of Ray Bradbury's works! So if you stand out, there is a chance to get into a publishing house and start as a chick lit translator, but then move to some serious fiction.”

Anna Maksimova, ABBYY Language Services

“Translators will always be in demand, along with doctors and teachers. As businesses go global, they feel a strong need for language localization — the process of adapting a product

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(website or software) to a specific culture.”

FINAL VERDICT

Law is one of the fields least likely to be “computerisable”. However, some workers might lose their bargaining power. According to the Atlas of Emerging Jobs, the demand for legal advisers and notary officers will drop rapidly after 2020 because of the Q&A web-sites, digital signatures and online databases. The good news is that technologies can create other jobs like online lawyers.

Anton Zatorsky, Student

As a first year law student, he agrees that some jobs might lose their value. But unlike most students, he took a gap year to do military service. Now Anton feels mature enough to pursue a career in politics.

“By law, any defendant can represent himself or herself in court. But I really doubt that in the next 50-100 years an average person can do it successfully without a law degree. It is not enough to open the Criminal Code and prove innocence. You have to know legal theory, legal history and sources, and that’s what law education is all about.”

Cyber law is booming now, and Internet users have become affected by spamming and data privacy. Anton foresees the prospects of virtual law firms, but remains sceptical about future legal call centres: “Sometimes you just need a face-to-face conversation with a lawyer, without any eavesdropping.

“When attorneys start practicing as a legal call centre agent, the legal profession doesn’t feel so hot anymore. Wearing headsets and taking phone calls would hardly impress anyone!”

For Anton, judicial power has always been, and remains essential: “Humans can

domesticate space and colonize the planet Mars, but there will always be a party of charge and a defense team”.

Ekaterina Sklyarenko, HeadHunter

“In 2015, the number of legal jobs has slightly shrunk. Throughout July and September of 2015, the vacancy rate in the legal profession declined by 7 percent, compared to a year ago and continues to decline. The number of job-seekers went up by 21 percent in July and September, and in October 2015, the figure increased by 25 percent.”

HEADHUNTED

The research report “New and Emerging Jobs in the Russian Job Market”, produced by HeadHunter in April 2014, states that the last three years have witnessed a growing popularity of infographic

designers, oriental language translators, trend-watchers, moralists, GMO farmers, and mobile game developers. Many of these occupations are already included in the Atlas of Emerging Jobs.

“It is not dogma or a work of science fiction,” says Andrey Sharonov, rector of Skolvoko Moscow School of Management. “It is just a good opportunity to ponder what kind of education you need and what you want to become.”

Today college students can obtain two, even three degrees, but it is not enough anymore to face tomorrow’s challenges. In an era of technological unemployment, every day is a lesson.



Julia Shimf *Not afraid of making you smile and cry. Fear of not making you think.*

CURBING CHINA, RUSSIA’S ASIAN ENTHUSIASM



Kronstadt is St. Petersburg’s main seaport.

Photo credit: T. Fimmele

Trans-Pacific Partnership: Billions of dollars in trade but the biggest gain could be political.

While the world’s largest trade pact is set to focus in the Asia-Pacific region, two significant players are missing — China and Russia.

A first look at the finalised Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which took a decade of secret negotiations to finalise, reveals an economic tool with promise of global trade, especially between the United States and emerging markets in Asia Pacific. But more importantly, the deal is locking in stronger trade ties to the region for the US and locking out its geopolitical opponents.

Among the 12 Pacific Rim countries involved, the agreement aims to bring about better accessibility to foreign goods that could amount to 40 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to the Office of the United States Trade Representative.

Part of US President Barack Obama’s

argument is that the free-trade zone from the TPP would “support more made-in-America exports”. It will also level the playing field for American businesses against “state-owned companies in other countries that undercut US competitors” — an idea he has strongly supported.

But for some, the TPP is a deal for countries in the vast Pacific to raft up against the bigger Asian players.

The US is blocking China’s rising dominance by passively shoring up support from countries that are also against China — far from being head-on and a departure from the tear-down of the Soviet Union economy during the Cold War.

“It is clear that the idea [of the TPP] is to produce, somehow, a balance to the growing influence of China,” said Dmitri Gavra, Russian political expert and professor at St. Petersburg State University.

“We see that in geopolitical terms, as

well as in terms of global finance. ... The Chinese *yuan* is becoming a player on the currency market. China is no longer a regional superpower. It’s starting to become a global player,” Gavra added.

China has entered the global pitch far beyond its shores with a keen interest in Sub-Saharan Africa — 15 hours away by flight. Last year, China’s trade with Africa hit a historic high with trade standing at \$200 billion dollars. American trade with Africa, on the other hand, amounted to \$96 billion.

Responding to the TPP, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed to Chinese media outlets that a Sino-Russian alliance is a “top foreign policy priority” moving forward. It is not difficult to see why — China took second place as Russia’s key export partner after the Netherlands in 2013.

“Obviously, the Trans-Pacific Partnership is just another US attempt to build an architecture of regional economic cooperation that the United States would benefit from. At the same time, I believe that the absence of two major regional players such as Russia and China in its composition will not promote the establishment of effective trade and economic cooperation,” Putin told Chinese media outlets.

A 2011 study conducted by the East-West Center estimates that Russia will likely lose out on approximately one billion dollars worth in welfare gains by 2025 from the TPP, while losses for China are estimated at \$15.7 billion.

As if a countermeasure to the new Pacific trade pact and economic sanctions from the West, Russia has been increasing its collaboration with China. The two are pursuing regional economic projects like the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt along former Soviet states like Kazakhstan and Belarus.

What’s the TPP about?

- The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is one of the biggest free trade agreements ever.

- It currently involves the United States, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam.

- The TPP aims to enhance trade and investment by lowering, or in some cases, eliminate trade tariffs. It also intends on enforcing standards for labour law and environmental law, and establish an investor-state dispute settlement mechanism.

- Details of the trade deal is highly secretive. It’s been in the talks for more than five years and ten years in the making.

It is clear that the idea [of the TPP] is to produce a balance to the growing influence of China.

In terms of Russian-Chinese ties, head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Fyodor Lukyanov, told Russia Direct that the relationship is asymmetrical. It is also one that looks borne out of their link with the West.

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Both China and Russia have been on the receiving end of unfair diplomatic treatment, and share similar historical leanings. However, some differences remain.

“Of course, economically China is much stronger than Russia. Meanwhile, politically in terms of experience with ‘big diplomacy’, Russia has a lot of advantages that China doesn’t have,” Lukyanov said.

The trade pact could very well amplify the strategic importance of a Sino-Russian alliance and give the two former communist nations reasons to form a regional trade bloc against the deal.

Continuing its pivot to Asia, Russia clinched a \$400-billion gas deal with China for the next thirty years in 2014. The two have also aligned their partnership in the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a \$100-billion development bank.

China views the AIIB as the equivalent of the World Bank and it’ll provide loans to Asian countries for capital programmes as a friendly gesture. While the AIIB is being set-up, the White House has repeatedly issued statements indicating its reservations and disappointment in its Asian and European allies, who’ve obtained membership of the bank.

Russia is one of the three major stockholders (the other being fellow BRICS member India) and manager of AIIB. This means that Russia will be able to put its own director on the board and this person will, in turn, get the opportunity to approve infrastructural and transport projects — contributing to the bank’s strategy.

With China possibly being Russia’s closest ally now, it remains to be seen if the TPP, marketed to be a “landmark, 21st-century trade agreement” will negatively affect Russia.

Pending ratifications in each TPP participant’s own parliaments, the alliance — marked by cooperation and mutual geopolitical and strategic interest — ties Russia to China in an intricate manner.

And whether Russia should react with fear or not, is not yet apparent.



Fann Sim is afraid of big social gatherings and bananas that look far from perfect because of a traumatic experience in her childhood.

HOW IKEA ITEMS IN YOUR KITCHEN CAN PREDICT THE FUTURE



The Pursuit of Happiness

In Russia, breaking plates, cups and glasses supposedly bodes well for the future and brings happiness. There is a common wedding tradition requiring newly-weds to throw their champagne flutes over their shoulders after emptying them. Indeed, what wouldn’t you do for love?

Fortune Cookie Cutlery

Russians are a hospitable bunch. This is why they use cutlery to predict who will be stopping by for tea. If you drop a tablespoon to the floor, expect a female visitor. If you drop a knife, expect a male guest. See that’s how easy it is to be a fortune teller.

FACEBOOK CHANGES THE GAME

Since its invention, the Internet has been a free space where people can present themselves in any form and without limits. Sometimes the boundaries between the virtual and the real merges or even blurs. Can we exist without virtual identity in social networks?

People who are interested in knowing more about you have a better position when you invite them to be “friends” with you on social networks like Facebook or VK.

“However, the users of social media websites sometimes expose wrong or more confidential information about themselves to friends, followers or strangers than they actually want and would in real life,” says professor Dr. Dmitri Gavra, chair of the Business Public Relations Department of St. Petersburg State University.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN RUSSIA

The use of social media influences billions of people — users change their habits and expectations which leads to personal, social and political changes. Most users in Russia use VK and it continues to be the most popular.

A study by market research agency Taylor Nelson Sofres, found that there are about 55 million active users per month in 2014. This is followed by Odnoklassniki with 40 million users. Moi Mir and Facebook take up the next two, with 25 and 24 million users respectively. Twitter continues to grow in Russia with about 8.5 million users.

This raises the question: Why are people willing to leap into the arms of social media? Is it simply convenience?

The use of social media allows users the access to images, files, profiles, information and other data whenever they are able to connect to the Internet. The ability to do so makes social media a great facilitator, one that many users associate convenience with.

Another phenomenon that can be observed from the use of social media is that many “friends” on social media have never met in real life.

A 2010 study by University of Oxford revealed while some social network users have more than 5,000 online friends, the human brain is usually capable of keeping a maximum of 150 friendships.

The Facebook obsession of hoarding friends may create the impression that some users are more sociable than others, which may not necessarily be true in real life. Social interactions in the real world are complex and unique in their manifestations and interrelationships.

THE REASONS WHY PEOPLE MAKE UP FALSE VIRTUAL IDENTITIES

In line with the growing prominence of social media, “sockpuppetry” or using false identities for deception can also be observed. The idea is centuries old, but the fast-changing and flexible has made creating sock puppets easier than ever before.

False identities provide individuals with



Can we exist without our virtual identity?
Photo credit: T. Rimmele

anonymity in the virtual world which can have certain advantages. Online users are able to speak out without fearing the repercussions of their actions.

They can conceal their true identity in the virtual world, speak freely, and break through the barriers enforced by governments and dictatorships across the world — as we have recently seen in Libya, Egypt and Iran. Online anonymity makes it possible and easier for people to discuss highly sensitive issues such as medical conditions, physical abuse and sexual orientation.

THE LESBIAN DISSIDENT WHO WAS NOT WHAT SHE SEEMED TO BE

In 2011, Amina Arraf, a 35-year-old Syrian-American woman, makes her first post on a private blog “Gay Girl in Damascus”. She writes about politics, the repression of the country’s pro-democracy movement and Mills and Boon-esque homosexual memoirs.

Amina is also actively blogging during the anti-government protests in March 2011. As a liberal and lesbian, she was a symbol of protest against the conservative and unstable society in Syria. The Guardian described her as “an unlikely hero of revolt in a conservative country”.

She quickly gained the attention of Western media but when the Guardian invited her for an interview, she did not show up. Amina’s cousin claimed that the blogger was kidnapped.

NPR’s Andy Carvin was the first journalist who noticed something new. The photos of Amina on Twitter show a Croatian woman residing in Great Britain. No ties to Syria at all. “She” was the creation of Tom MacMaster, a doctorate student at the University of Edinburgh.

Miss Arraf was a fake virtual identity.

Why? It was a matter of authority.

As it turns out, MacMaster had some very strong views on Middle Eastern affairs. He created Amina Arraf to share his anti-regime views from the point of view of a Syrian woman to a Western audience.

He explained: “I never expected this level of attention.”



Andreas Rossbach was thinking a lot about how to live wisely these days. *FEAR* is nothing more than an obstacle that stands in the way of progress.

Breaking up with Facebook

A 2013 University of Vienna study found that data protection issues and social pressure for an impressive friend list were among the reasons for leaving. Shallow conversations, general dissatisfaction and loss of interest in the site were also reasons for droves of “virtual identity suicides”.

First things first: it’s not easy. I struggled to find the “Delete” option. When I found it, Facebook asked if I was sure. Am I sure? Do I want to break up with my virtual identity? Pictures of my Facebook “friends” appeared: Don’t leave! We will miss you.

I was then asked to tell Facebook why and I said it was due to privacy concerns. Wasting too much time and addiction fears, unfortunately, was not an option. Facebook then tried to persuade me to stay by explaining how the company deals with its private data.

The next step: Facebook warned me that by deleting, I would lose all my photos and posts. I hesitated but continued the process.

This time, Facebook said I could simply deactivate my account and return later. In this case, everything would stay where it was but remain hidden.

The option to deactivate was an alluring one. I actually started to doubt the idea of deleting my account, and finally decided to just deactivate it.

One week later, I am back online. I am posting, sharing, liking and I am up-to-date.

REAL PEOPLE UNRULY ROUBLE

“I had no idea how my son would survive in the UK.”

Modern Russia is no stranger to financial crisis. Extreme hyperinflation in the early 1990s left many people impoverished in the blink of an eye. Companies which imported goods, especially food, found themselves in deep trouble and it was only a matter of time before supermarkets began to run low on products from abroad. The currency crisis affected nearly every level of life and many faced the unexpected time of trouble totally unprepared.

Some people are afraid that it's happening all over again. After Russia's sudden decision to let the Russian rouble freely float on currency markets instead of supporting the exchange rate, a new rouble crisis began. This move triggered a rapid plunge in value of the national currency — 33 roubles bought one US dollar in June 2014 while it took over 60 roubles to buy one dollar in October 2015. But 70 roubles bought one dollar on January 1 this year, a drop of over half the value of the currency compared to the US dollar in the span of less than six months.

Experts have speculated endlessly on the causes of this shocking volatility, but normal citizens are the ones most affected. The voice of the man on the street is the best place to begin to understand how the lives of average citizens have changed in reaction to the new rouble crisis. Several people from diverse financial backgrounds, including high-

level commodity trading, local business owners, and students, both Russians and internationals, gave interviews about their biggest fears relating to the rouble devaluation and how they expect the rouble to perform in this uncertain world.

Nils, Student from Germany

I was accepted to several exchange programmes across Europe, but one of the reasons I decided to come to Russia was because of the exchange rate.

When I came here at the beginning of the semester, I was getting 75 roubles for every Euro — I felt really rich here compared to Europe. At that rate, it was no problem for me to get a nice flat near the centre of town, so I signed a contract for six months.

Now the rate is under 70 and only looks like it will be going down. I'm afraid I will either have to live each month with much less money than I hoped or will have to cancel my lease and lose a lot of money.

Maks, Trader in Russia

Some of my inexperienced colleagues have been calling me ever since late 2014, when this rouble “crisis” began, begging me for advice on how to survive in the business. I just laughed at them. A good trader knows how to profit from any swings in any commodities — in fact, I love volatility!

I make even more money now than I ever have before the “crisis”. The one thing I'm worried about is oil. It looks like the Russian air campaign in Syria is at least partly focused on disrupting the illegal sale of oil extracted in Iraq and Syria by the terrorists to Turkey, causing downward pressure on the price of oil. But it won't effect me that much, I will just shift more of my focus to the commodities market if the price goes above \$55 a barrel.

... in fact, I love volatility! I make even more money now than I ever have before the “crisis”.

Anna, Pensioner in Russia

My grandson has recently been accepted to a school in Wales and we sent him off only a few months ago. We are so proud of him! But I know that life in Great Britain is expensive and since I want him to focus on his studies, I agreed to support him from here by sending him some money every month. But now my little pension is worth half of what it was before. I am doing everything I can to make sure that he eats. Even though his parents are also sending him money, I'm

worried that it won't be enough for him.

Elena, Coffee Shop Owner in Russia

The rouble crisis almost caused us to go out of business. We had ordered some coffee machines from Italy for our shop and they were in transit to Russia when the big crisis kicked off late last year. We didn't expect the exchange rate to go so crazy, so we didn't even consider to pay in advance, which would have been very smart in hindsight. We left the payments until our coffee machines were delivered, like we usually do — like any business usually does.

The technology was much more expensive for us in terms of roubles when they finally arrived. We even had to withhold pay to our employees for a month, and ended the month negative, so we had to dip into our meagre savings to make ends meet, which we nearly emptied to pay for the difference in price for the new machines in the first place. It was the most difficult time for our business and we never thought things could change so fast.

Unpredictable shifts can catch any of us by surprise, and major moves in the national currency affect nearly all segments of the population. But Russia is a nation of resilient people, and even though many are worried about how to deal with the most recent rouble crisis, the most common message that people shared was that they expected to make it through the crisis and are looking forward to more stable times ahead.



Oleg Maslov *Nothing pumps blood through your brain quicker than the fear of insignificance.*

STATE OF FEAR

Several civil society activists have recently fled Russia because of threats or fearing prosecution. But how are those who stayed managing?

“Civil society in Russia is non-existent,” Vitus Media, spokesperson for the St. Petersburg based NGO Civic Control, says bluntly when I tell him that I want to talk about the state of the civil society in Russia. The aim of the organisation is to increase the public accountability of state officials. According to another prominent human rights NGO, Russian civil society is undergoing a long period of stagnation. At the same time, it's becoming more professional. Vitus is calling those who carry on “madmen”.

Human rights organisations have been continuously criticising Russia for its “deeply negative climate” with regard to human rights — especially since 2012. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly denounced the Russian authorities for “intensifying its crackdown on civil society”. “They are not launching a

crackdown on civil society, but on its shadow!” Vitus Media almost shouts.

During the interview, Vitus Media repeatedly referred to aggressive social conditions and legal framework as key factors preventing its development, not the policy of the state. The organisation was included into the list of foreign agents a year before for their involvement into politics while using foreign funding. They deny this involvement.

The battle has been ongoing for at least a decade. One such instance was the Federal Registry Service, set up in 2004. Along with the Ministry of Justice, it oversaw NGOs. This subjected them to additional oversight, audits and endless paperwork. Ultimately, it was repealed under former President Medvedev's tenure in 2008, a move welcomed by civil society activists. “The hand was raised but no

hit followed,” says professor Sungurov, the Head of the Department of Political Science in Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg.

Another major problem arose when the Federal Tax Service imposed fines on several NGOs for not paying a profit tax — which nonprofits were not supposed to pay. The fine hindered the work of the NGOs. As reported by an anonymous interviewee, employees of the FTS were incentivised by the amount of fines imposed, an allegation a source inside the Tax Service calls “absurd”. It took years in litigation to overturn accumulated multimillion-rouble fines. The damage, however, had already been done.

These were the main reasons why between 2006 and 2011 the number of registered NGOs in St. Petersburg dropped by 26 percent. In a 2012 article, Sungurov identifies “unfriendly legislation” as one of the principle reasons for the sharp decline. When I ask him about that, he says, “Yes, unfriendly. But that was before the law on foreign agents.”

LAW INTRODUCTION

Under the law introduced in 2012, nonprofit organisations have to self-register into the list of foreign agents if they are conducting political activity and receiving foreign funding. They also have to indicate their status in all the materials they distribute. A fine for non-compliance is up to 500,000 roubles. Several human rights organisations challenged the law, but the Constitutional Court upheld it on the grounds of being desirable for sovereignty of the state and not being discriminatory. It rejected the claim that the words “foreign agent” in the Russian language have strong espionage connotations.

The organisations on the list must also submit additional paperwork to the Ministry, give up more control over their financial operations, and undergo an audit — the cost of which is reported to be an unbearable financial burden. Arbitrary inclusion into the list by the Ministry of

(continued on the next page)

Justice is usually challenged in court which brings additional legal fees.

“To speak about Civic Control, [the law] is a targeted contract on a handful of ‘bothersome’ organisations, and there is a political direction to do everything to make their functioning impossible. In that sense, [the government] is looking for any excuse to impose a fine and overwhelm the organisations with litigation cases. This is a kind of ‘soft annihilation’ of the human rights organisations.”

Out of 100 organisations on the list of foreign agents, eight are based in St. Petersburg, compared to over a reported 226,000 NGOs registered in Russia. “The number is insignificant quantitatively, but is significant qualitatively. This number shows the real number of human rights and civic organisations which are working effectively,” says the Civic Control spokesperson. “Not many, but the most active ones and those closest to decision making,” Sungurov agrees.

One of the major concerns of the civil society is that the Law on Foreign Agents does not define “political activity”, which allows for a broad interpretation by the state, often exclusively at the expense of “unwelcome NGOs”. The Russian word *politika* means both policy and politics. For the latter — mostly pertaining to elections — participation of the foreign-financed organisations should be minimal. “It’s hard to imagine political parties financed from abroad being welcomed in any society,” says Vitus Media. In terms of policy, those NGOs have an advisory role and it is up to the discretion of the state whether to follow their advice or not.

In 2014, an NGO called Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg — a watchdog for the human rights for conscripts and military men — was included into the list by the Ministry of Justice after publishing on their webpage a call for a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Ukraine. The organisation immediately asked the Ministry of Justice to be excluded since they stopped receiving all foreign funding the previous week. The response they got? There is no legal procedure to exclude an organisation from the list. It took two years to adopt amendments to the law to fill the legal void.

When asked about state pressure on civil society organisations, Aleksandr Peredruk, spokesperson for Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg, said that before they had been previously forced into the list, they had to undergo audits by the Ministry of Justice, the Prosecutor’s Office, the anti-extremism and anti-corruption departments of the police, and a fire inspection — overall more than 10 audits in a year. Subsequently, their time as a foreign agent was calm — no more audits except for the one by the organisation’s own request. “My guess is that the instruments have changed. You can no longer surprise NGOs with audits,” says Peredruk.

TINKER TAILOR FOREIGN AGENT

Since the Soldiers’ Mothers gave up their foreign funding, they now rely mainly on state support. While presidential grants for NGOs only cover short-term projects, substantial change in the society requires at least a three-year project, according to

human rights activists.

“Between the two previous grants awarded by the state there were two months the organisation was in conservation mode, working for free or paying small wages from private donations,” Peredruk adds. It was barely possible due to their private fundraising system and the government subsidy to pay the office rent. They were one of only three foreign agents to receive a presidential grant this year.

But the worst consequence of the law is the stigmatisation associated with human rights organisations and the nonprofit sector as a whole. “The organisations that have never been included into the list of foreign agents — and never will — they are still in fact there because of this stigma,” says Peredruk.

After finding themselves on the list, organisations are facing ever-decreasing cooperation from government bodies. As an illustrative example, the Soldiers’ Mothers demanded public statistics about the deaths in some army dislocations, only to be refused on the basis that they were foreign agents — among other reasons — and were repeatedly excluded from roundtables by the Ministry of Defense.

Peredruk and I are talking just the day after they learned they were no longer considered to be a foreign agent. Not without drama: the Ministry of Justice made this decision a week earlier, but the organisation remained on the list throughout the week. If you are confused, you get the idea.

However, the Soldiers’ Mothers are afraid that it is not their legal status but rather the perception of them as a foreign agent that is going to last, further harming future cooperation with state bodies.

A NOD TO THE CANON

“Should I speak about the bad media effects or the good ones?” asks Peredruk. The Soldiers’ Mothers’ relationship with the media is complicated. Sometimes the media — especially state-controlled — applies “troublesome pressure”, filming smearing reports and visiting the employees of the NGO at night. Reports are often biased and information misrepresented, but they are still capable of doing balanced, quality reports. Peredruk believes that “the question of bias boils down to whether there are political implications for the topic at the moment.”

However, Vitus Media says that propaganda is not to blame, but the lack of critical thinking: “To fill an empty pot, the pots must first be empty. The problem lies with the emptiness of the pots, not with what is being poured inside.”

At the same time it is the independent media who have helped prevent the complete stigmatisation of foreign agents. Media hype is the likely reason the Soldiers’ Mothers was not fined for not self-registering as a foreign agent — a striking exception to the general rule.

Another problem civic organisations are facing is an aggressive social environment — like a civil war within the civil society. “The [patriotic] consolidation of the public after the events in Ukraine [2013 Maidan and Crimea] gave voice to those who wanted to express in public what was inappropriate before,” Sungurov explains.

Civic Control is not aware of any

threats against them or its workers. Vitus Media, their representative, says he was receiving threats while previously working in the Russian LGBT Network, “but the motives were different.”

At the same time, in the Soldiers’ Mothers “virtually every employee of the organisation received personal threats, but they are likely unfounded and were made just for intimidation,” says Peredruk.

“I would say I was feeling more fear for my family, to be honest. My family sometimes also receives those. I came from a quite leftist, anarchist background, that is why I was never taking those threats seriously, but my relatives perceive them

differently,” Peredruk adds.

At the end of the interview Vitus Media says he can only speak about the present. “I am not going to make any predictions [about Russian civil society]. You can only make predictions for states under the rule of law. In Russia you can only do fortune-telling.”



Aleks Lokhmutov *Afraid of commas and death by reading a boring article.*

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Svetlana Alexievich – a discovery of the soul through accounts of human suffering by interviewing witnesses to wars and catastrophes.

Svetlana Alexievich was born on May 31, 1948 in the west Ukrainian town of Stanislaviv and later moved to Belarus. After graduating with a degree in Journalism and trying her hand in writing short stories, she chose a literary genre in which human voices speak for themselves, tell their stories, and recount the main events of their lives. When asked what is unique about her books, she said: “I’m writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, understood and remembered during an event. What they believed in or mistrusted, what illusions, hopes and fears they experienced.”

For each book, she interviewed around 500 people and then it took her three to four years to put together a comprehensive collection of voices for particular events in history. Her chronicles range from the memories of women fighting in the Soviet Army during World War II (“War’s Unwomanly Face” 1985) to an oral history of the Chernobyl disaster (“Voices from Chernobyl” 1997). She has also written about the collapse of the Soviet Union (“Second-hand Time” 2013) through a collection of interviews with witnesses. Alexievich described her entire body of work as a “story of one Soviet-Russian soul.”

A HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

For these efforts, the Swedish Academy has awarded her the Nobel Prize in Literature this year. She is the first non-fiction writer in half a century and the first journalist to receive such a prestigious honour. In their announcement of this year’s winner, the Swedish Academy praised Alexievich “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.” Sara Danius, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, added that “it’s a true achievement not only in material but also in form” and that her work amounts to “a history of emotions — a history of the

soul, if you wish”.

The history of emotions comes alive particularly in her first book, *War’s Unwomanly Face*, in which female soldiers serving in the Soviet Army during World War II had their chance to speak up about their experiences. According to Alexievich, her motive for writing this book was to explore a different side of war. In the past, men had plenty of opportunities to tell their stories, focusing mainly on descriptions of decisive battles and the weapons used to achieve victory. In comparison, women’s memories were full of intense feelings and pain and thus offered a different perspective.

FEAR OF MEMORIES

Sadly, female veterans of the Soviet Army have kept silent about their experiences for decades. The reason for this silence was their fear to assert themselves in a world dominated by men. As one woman from Alexievich’s book remembered: “Immediately after the war, I got married. I hid myself behind my husband. Behind the household, the diapers. I liked to hide myself behind all of this. My mother begged me: ‘Be quiet! Be quiet! Don’t own up to it!’ I have done my duty for my homeland, but it makes me sad that I was there.”

But the biggest fear in relation to “War’s Unwomanly Face” came from the Soviet authorities. They were afraid of the “ugly side” of war depicted in this book such as dirt, rats, diseases, injuries and death. This contradicted the official Soviet propaganda which used patriotic symbols and accounts of the heroic victory over Nazi Germany to bolster support for the regime. Thus, all books or articles were carefully censored to prevent the release of stories of Stalin’s early incompetence, the defeats and the heavy cost of victory.

In the early 1980s, Alexievich suffered from this policy while trying to get “War’s Unwomanly Face” published. She was

(continued on the next page)

forced to meet with a representative from the Soviet censorship body to discuss which interviews had to be excluded. In the latest edition of her book, she dedicated an entire chapter to examples of such interviews and to the conversations she had with the censor:

"You are humiliating women with your primitive naturalism. Heroes. Depose them. Make them into ordinary women. But these women are saints".

"The first German villages... We were

young. Strong. Four years without women. In the cellars wine, food. We caught German girls and... Ten men raped one... Today, I can't understand how I could have ever participated in something like this... The only thing we were afraid of was that our girls would find out. Our nurses. We were ashamed in front of them".

"This is a lie! You are slandering our soldiers, who liberated half of Europe. We don't need your little history, we need the bigger picture. The history of our victory.

You don't love anybody. You don't love our great ideas. The ideas of Marx and Engels."

Alexievitch has never hesitated to face her own or other people's fears. She stood up against Soviet and post-Soviet authorities by focusing on controversial events and trying to form a history of emotions surrounding those incidents. Therefore, some might see her selection as the new Nobel Prize winner as a political decision amidst Russia's involvement in

the Syrian civil war. Dissident writers in Russia, however, took it as a sign that the opposition was being heard and that it would amplify criticism of post-Soviet authoritarianism.



Jenny Fleischer *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*

STREET ART: BETWEEN PUBLIC ART & VANDALISM



A work by Pascha Cas for the Street Art Museum in 2014.

Photo credit: D. Kopyciok

Why does Russia fear colour?

A quest to find a public art scene in St. Petersburg.

Step outside the Hermitage. Golden frames. Deep colours. A shining old glaze lies over the city centre of Russia's Northern Venice. A raindrop gently lands on my skin. It starts to rain when I step out of the bus. I am no longer in the city centre. Old buildings loom into the cloudy sky now. I look around and can only see one colour: Grey.

"I love colours!" [sic] says Vladimir Chernychev, a street artist who is currently based in St. Petersburg, "colours are important". Street art is not a new trend. It emerged out of the need to express opinions publicly, to send political and personal messages, to change the look of a city — street art colours the world. However, the opinions are deeply divided: Is it art or is it vandalism? There seems to be no real answer. But the idea remains that street art is simply art in a public environment; the question lingers on the legality of it.

ART OR VANDALISM?

The Creative Association of Curators in Russia, hosted their final conference of

their ongoing art project "Critical Mass" in September. They discussed the idea of creative practice as a social change agent: Can street art change the world? Artem Filatov, an artist based in Nizhni Novgorod and organiser of local street art excursions in his hometown, represented the Russian side. Filatov and his team create a dialogue between artists, the government and the society. With their public excursions they aim to explain why street art is important for a city. "They [the government] don't have any idea, what street art is!" Filatov says and sees a lack of street art in Russia, especially in St. Petersburg: "I think, St. Petersburg is a poor city from a street art point of view." Artists would prefer to stay in their community, he explains, rather work in private places, behind locked doors — away from the public eye.

Yulia Vlasov works at the Street Art Museum in St. Petersburg and is optimistic about the development: "In Russia, street art is not so popular and widespread at the moment. But I am sure this will change!" With the growing acceptance in the society for public art and the support of

cultural institutions such as the museum, street art could find new backing, explains Vlasov. The Street Art Museum is located inside the active Sloplast plastic factory. The factory owner, Dmitry Zaitsev, and his son Andrey realised their idea of a Street Art Museum. Andrey Zaitsev, now the director of the museum, used the huge space as an opportunity to provide a platform for artists to work legally. This industrial area outside the city centre seems to be a perfect place: Big walls and even financial support from the museum.

"Street artists come mostly from Russia and we want of course to support Russian street artists!" said Yulia Vlasov, "We choose artists who we like and who fit to our museum's concept." The Street Art Museum works together with several curators who financially support the museum and choose artists. "Street art is not only about politics," Vlasov makes clear. "For example, in this area 500,000 people live here in this district. And it's full of factories, no historical buildings. Everything is grey. Street art brings colour in people's life!" But can the dynamics of colour changes the world? "It may not change politics," explains Vlasov, "but it can change the perspective of the people, how to see the world." Still, the Street Art Museum is a private place. Artists colour a factory, not the city and the government keeps its distance to these kind of projects.

LET'S PAINT GREY WALLS!

"I think the Street Art Museum is horrible," says Vladimir Chernychev, "it's not organic. It's all artificial. Art should be on the street, not in a museum." Just like Artem Filatov, Chernychev is from Nizhni Novgorod and specialised in street art in urban and abandoned places, especially wooden street art: "With street art we try to understand and keep the spirit and histories of our city. So people don't forget!" Filatov found his way to wooden art through graffiti and street art — always trying to keep the connection to the society: "Street art creates a new way to message people."

At the same time, when street art gets thrown into the spotlight and gains attention in the public sphere, a new and popular angle emerges: commercial street art. Companies, such as Nike or Coca-Cola, pay artists for their work to push their product into a trendy public

environment. "I really don't like this," stresses Chernychev. However, street art stays public art without boundaries, without rules — only under the strict eye of the government. Once the difference between commercial and street art is discovered, it is — from an artistic point — open for deep interpretations.

DOES RUSSIA FEAR CHANGE?

Red. Blue. Yellow. Colours give you endless opportunities to make the world more beautiful. And still street art fears legal restrictions and landowners stick to their colour — grey stays grey. I cross the bridge. Sprayed advertisements for karate and ballet lessons, for sex and coffee shops lead my way. The glaring street lamps cast long shadows. Street art has the power to merge with our everyday life. The potential to make our world more personal and colourful. Does street art have the power to change our life if we just let it?

What is street art?

In ancient Greece and Rome, citizens painted the walls with public slogans ("graffito", ital., "scratch"). Through a hub of graffiti in the 1970s, the idea of public art was reborn. Public paintings, sprayed art, video projections, street installations or using stickers and mosaic belong to the concept of street art. The original idea of spreading ideas, expressing feelings and raising attention to political or social issues is slowly shifting. Street art is becoming more commercial with the sub-cultural scene turning mainstream.

But the development of street art continues. There are no rules, hence no limits to the artists' creativity. Artists aim to colour the city. Therefore, the social acceptance and understanding for this non-traditional art increases. However, the conflict between street artists and the government is not yet solved: Is it vandalism or is it art? Most importantly, it is up to you.



Denise Kopyciok *Coming from Berlin to SPb, I kind of like this "Soviet time" feeling when going to the dorms. But still. It's 2015. And I miss colour.*

RUSSIAN WOMEN'S PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS



A couple on the Neva embankment.

Photo credit: G. Pigni

An insight into what Russian women really want, from a foreign man's perspective.

“*Zhenskoye schastiye byl by miliy ryadom,*” goes a popular '90s Russian song. This roughly translates as “women's happiness depends on having their dear one close”. Many feminists would likely have a differing opinion.

They would judge this statement as degrading and even humiliating the notion of the woman, representing her as someone incomplete without a male counterpart.

However, the song naively expresses a necessity all women (and not only them) have: finding somebody to share their life with. In many developed societies, women have similar professional ambitions as their male counterparts. But in Russia, traditional gender roles are still difficult to eradicate.

In this social framework, a young woman's main goal is to find a suitable partner, marry and have children. While women generally take on familial responsibilities, their partners traditionally provide security and economic stability. This very traditional view of the Russian couple is also represented in language: the term *zamuzhem* which stands for “married woman” literally translates as “behind the husband”.

According to figures from the World Bank, Russian women on average marry much younger compared to many European countries. In Russia, the average age for marrying is 24, while the United States and Europe is around 30.

In provincial areas, girls marry in their early 20s. And not long ago, a 25-year-old woman who isn't engaged would be a reason of concern for her family.

Maria, 32, from Togliatti, Samara Oblast, has been living in Spain for several years with her boyfriend.

“All of my friends in Togliatti found a husband when they were 20 and they already have kids. In contrast, my friends in Spain are unmarried. ... Marriage here is so important for women because it gives them confidence and stability, while in Europe it is generally delayed and prioritized differently. ... I think Russian women lack independence.”

Women's search for their significant other is particularly hard in Russia. The country has a shortage of men due to their high mortality rate.

Russian women proudly carry on the “double burden” of job and family responsibilities

Elsewhere, life expectancy for women is five years longer than men. In Russia, the former outlast the latter on an average of between nine to 12 years.

Unhealthy lifestyles, drug abuse, alcohol and violence decrease the life expectancy of Russian men.

Anatoliy Ivanovich, manager of a marriage agency in St. Petersburg, said, “among our customers, women account

for twice the number of men. In most other agencies there is an even higher disproportion.”

Russian women face fierce competition to secure good partners. While they take constant care of their outer and inner selves, their male counterparts are considered to be spoiled and “relaxed”.

“Men here have more choices, they behave like kings. ... On the other hand, I personally feel the competition,” admits Margarita, 23, an artist from Novosibirsk.

“Russian men are typically spoiled because always surrounded by female attention,” added 32-year-old Maria, a teacher.

Women often tolerate their partners' misbehavior in the attempt to preserve the relationship. Domestic violence is a common phenomenon, which generally stems from heavy alcohol consumption by men.

Amnesty International's report “Russian Federation: Russia's Hidden Shame” mentions that 36,000 Russian women are physically abused by their partners daily. Victims often don't register the complaints, since these episodes are often perceived as “part of the daily routine” and institutions don't provide adequate support.

In a similar context, having a satisfactory family life can be hard, that's why many Russian women have been searching for happiness elsewhere.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the country witnessed a mass exodus of women marrying foreigners and starting lives abroad. In order to fulfill their family-oriented ambitions, they were ready to adapt to new cultural settings and lifestyles.

Since the '90s, economic and social conditions in Russia have significantly improved, and marrying foreigners is not

as popular as seen ten years ago.

“Our customers are less willing to take the risk and face the unknown when they can find a decent husband here,” says Anatoliy Ivanovich.

Though at a slower pace than in Europe, female mobility and autonomy are showing signs of improvement in the country. “Russian women are becoming more and more independent and now they have the possibility to choose and not just to be chosen. ... If a woman is single, it's often because of a personal choice,” said Elena, 60, an office worker.

Especially in big cities like St. Petersburg and Moscow, domestic partnerships have become a popular alternative and delayed marriages are not frowned upon that much anymore.

As the World Bank labour participation rate points out, Russian girls today are increasingly more self-sufficient and often live on their own. Many run their own businesses and have successful careers.

Even though the majority of Russian women consider economic independence and professional success to be important, they continue to value the traditional aspects of gender norms.

“Among our women self-sufficiency is rising. They have ambitions, they are successful and make big money ... still they haven't given up family values,” says Anatoliy.

In many Western countries which have stronger gender equality, women seem to be compromising their intrinsic roles of being mothers and wives. Uniquely, Russian women proudly carry on the “double burden” of work and family responsibilities. Anastasia and Viktoria, both students in St. Petersburg seem to agree on the matter: “Before getting married, we want to complete our education and get a good job. We will then be ready to take the next important step.”



Giovanni Pigni *Since the day I came to St. Petersburg I don't fear loneliness anymore.*



MAN IN THE MIRROR

Don't Forget!

If you leave the house hastily and find that you must come back for something you forgot, a mirror will come in handy. Turning back on your steps is a bad omen in Russia. If you absolutely must, however, take a few seconds to stare at your reflection in the mirror and you'll be off the hook!

ST. PETERSBURG: STILL A WINDOW TO THE WEST?

“Why Russia? Aren’t you afraid?”

“Yeah but I’m going to St. Petersburg, that’s not really Russia.”

Every foreigner visiting Russia’s northern capital has probably heard this at least once. The city’s appearance and Western lifestyle feed the assumption that St. Petersburg is the country’s least Russian city. We decided to verify that.

Built by Italian architects in the 18th century, St. Petersburg’s neoclassical buildings, many canals, and 342 bridges have rightfully earned the city the nickname “Venice of the North”.

Peter the Great, the founder of the city, intended to build it as a “window on Europe”. During his reign, he moved the royal court from Moscow to St. Petersburg and forced the noblemen to cut off their long beards, wear European clothes, and take up Western habits like smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee.

Following that, Russian society has been torn between Westernizers and Slavophiles. The latter were convinced that Western influence was harmful to the correct development of their civilization. Slavic people had to follow their own unique path rooted in the Orthodox faith and an attachment to the Motherland.

But flash forward to contemporary St. Petersburg. Does it still reflect the historical tension between traditional Russian and Western values? Is St. Petersburg still the most European city in Russia?

We asked natives and visitors to the city what they thought.

A “WINDOW ON EUROPE”

“Of course, St. Petersburg was built according to European canons, it cannot be compared even to Moscow in that respect,” said Nikita, a local civil engineer.

From shopping arcades with exotic names like *Au Pont Rouge* (At the Red

Even though we’re not Europeans, we dress European. Even our restaurants, we have the same restaurants and we actually prefer their cuisine.

The Great Patriotic War meant a terrible loss for all Slavic people, marking a huge difference that will always separate us from the West.

Bridge) and the *Passage*, to the mundane Victorian building with the French engraving *Pharmacie Prof. Dr de Poehl & Fils* on Vasilevsky Island — the city clearly looks outside for inspiration.

St. Petersburg’s demographic displays what sociologists characterize as the “First Russia”, meaning a rather cosmopolitan and westernized part of Russian society. Young people are dressed in The North Face parkas and Nike sneakers. They carry vintage backpacks, and the grungiest of them dye their hair in neon colors.

“Even though we’re not Europeans, we dress European. Even our restaurants, we have the same restaurants and we actually prefer their cuisine,” said Elmira, a 24-year-old medicine student from St. Petersburg.

Indeed, the city offers a diverse range of eateries — sushi joints, dinners with eclectic decors, and a countless variety of bars, from beat-up Fidel on Dumskaya, to the high end lounge, Arka, on Bolshaya Konnyushennaya.

St. Petersburg is also the main stage for several international events, concerts, exhibitions and theatre shows. Besides, a crushing majority of our interviewees revealed that they watch American films and TV programmes like “The Big Bang Theory” and “How I Met Your Mother”. Even the music that people listen to is predominantly Anglophone.

“ST. PETERSBURG IS RUSSIA, ONLY RUSSIA AND NOTHING ELSE!”

Even if St. Petersburg residents are

believed to be more open-minded than other Russians, they certainly haven’t embraced Western values to the point of giving up their own.

Only one of our interviewees classified St. Petersburg as a part of Europe. The rest were unanimous in that Russians and Westerners had different mentalities.

They identified hospitality as a typical Russian trait in which the West was lacking. Russians see themselves as generally welcoming but the only condition is “foreigners need to respect our culture and way of thinking,” remarks Valera. They also mentioned the innate sincerity of the Russian people.

“When we smile, it’s because we mean it, not just to make a face,” said Yulia, a 40-year-old native of St. Petersburg. “People there are cold, they don’t care about each other. They small talk about the weather. Here people really look at you, they see each other,” added Elmira in another interview.

However, their light-hearted tone changes radically when the topic of LGBT rights comes up. We spoke to people aged 19 to 70, and many of them consider homosexuality to be a sin, a disease, or both. The moderate ones believe that sexual preferences should remain private because of its potentially harmful effects on the sexual development of children.

“On the one hand it’s everybody’s personal choice. But on the other hand, I wouldn’t want my child to grow up in a country where people do it openly,” said Elmira and Anastasia, both studying medicine in St. Petersburg.

Besides being known as a window on Europe, the city also earned the epithet of the “Hero City”. During the last global conflict, its residents proved their resilience and patriotism by holding their ground in a siege that lasted 900 days.

One of the divisive aspects between Russians and Westerners is their perception of the war. While the rest of the world was involved in World War II, Russians were fighting in a separate conflict — their Great Patriotic War. Still today, an array of monuments around St. Petersburg commemorate this great victory and the immense sacrifice of the Russian people.

“The Great Patriotic War meant a terrible loss for all Slavic people marking a huge difference that will always separate us from the West,” said Dmitry, 35, a native of St. Petersburg.

“IN THE WEST WHAT MATTERS IS APPEARANCE, IN RUSSIA IT’S THE INNER SELF.”

People here remember Peter’s plan to build the city as a “Window on Europe”, but they make a difference between form and matter.

As Olga, a 29-year-old dancer explained, “St. Petersburg is Russia, but

we just have this tradition in Russia ... there is this tendency to think that abroad, people know better. They have figured everything out about life and that we know nothing; we are primitive. We are embarrassed by ourselves and from that comes this unhealthy habit of imitating. It’s nothing but imitation because inside we remain the same as our forefathers. We can’t run away from Russia, she’s in our blood”.

This, despite all the outward similarities, may be the most insightful observation on Russia and its people — even those born and raised in cosmopolitan St. Petersburg.



**Giovanni Pigni
Nicole Akakpo**

“Venice of the North” is the nickname. So it is only right that an Italian who loves to speak Russian, and a sort of Russian who isn’t always recognised as one, teamed up to find out where exactly St. Petersburg stands on a scale of super European to unmistakably Russian.



THE FRIEND ZONE

Friendships are Important

There’s a saying in Russia: “Better to have a hundred friends than a hundred roubles”. Indeed friendships are important, and to protect these bonds from evil forces, certain rules must be followed.

How NOT to Say Goodbye

Don’t say goodbye while standing on both sides of the threshold of a doorway, or it will lead to an argument. The same will happen if you break a handhold by going around a lamppost from both sides. However, if the worst comes to worst, the relationship can still be saved if both parties say “hello for a 100 years” right after!

Lastly, if you step on a friend’s foot, they have to step on yours as well to prevent an argument.

Salty Sweet

If you inadvertently pour salt on the floor while cooking, expect a quarrel. But since you were already in the kitchen, you can just pour some sugar over it and thus restore your karmic peace. Another alternative, just draw a cross in the scattered salt.

NEVER LOSE YOUR ROOTS: MUSLIMS IN ST. PETE

It is fearful to lose yourself. But isn't it even more fearful to lose the religious identity you were born with? Muslims in St Petersburg say yes.

She takes a deep breath and prays to all Gods of the universe not to be hit by a car on the bustling street; the woman secures one last fold of her head scarf around her chin and hastily crosses Kronversky Prospect. Safely on the other side, she pushes open a massive wooden door and falls into another world...

It is the St. Petersburg Mosque. Away from the hustle of the city, this other world is like a pure pearl for local Muslims in St. Petersburg. The mosque is the main place in the city which helps Muslims preserve their connection with Islam, as well as understand, save, and exercise their religious identity. Here, thousands of Muslims are not only praying and celebrating big dates, but also learning how to read the Quran in Arabic. In this regard, the mosque also acts as a place for spiritual education by organising special Arabic lessons on the weekend.

ON THE WAY TO ISLAM

Firaya Rashitova is one of the activists among Tatar Muslims living in St. Petersburg. She and her colleagues are organising various religious events that help other Muslims understand the Quran correctly. She herself grasped the words of Allah only due to the St. Petersburg Mosque.

Born in Soviet Kazan, Firaya wasn't able to practice her faith in the traditional way in the former communist state. She also never learned to read the Quran in the original Arabic language:

"During atheistic USSR times, my family was concealing that we were practicing Islam. Of course, we were keeping traditional Muslim fast and cooking special food, but we didn't know how to pray properly and we didn't wear a head scarf," Firaya remembers.

... but we didn't know how to pray properly...

The only member of Firaya's family, who was lucky enough to live in accordance with the traditions, was her great-grandmother. She stayed with her grandchildren only on big Muslim holidays. The grandmother would pray before sunrise on these days and it was something like a miracle for little Firaya.

But little did Firaya know that she was foreordained to accomplish these same wonders. Despite living in the Venice of the North throughout the '70s, Firaya

visited the St. Petersburg Mosque for the first time in 1999. That year, Mufti Jafyar Ponchaev invited several teachers from Islamic states to conduct Quran lessons in the mosque and preach original, peaceful Islam. Firaya enjoyed studying in the course and despite the years, still keeps in touch with some of the group mates. Take for instance the Muslim couple from Samara, who came searching for a peace of mind in the mosque after the death of their son.

"Only faith and return to origins helped them to overcome sorrow. After those Quran courses they even built a small mosque in honour of their son," Firaya remembers.

After a couple years of the Arabic courses, Firaya learned to read the Quran without any mistakes. Then she started teaching the basics of Islam in order to help St. Petersburg Muslims understand their identity and traditions. It turned out to be popular in "Muslim Russia" to invite someone who knows Quran well to family events to read *surahs* (chapters of the Quran) aloud. Usually after a *surah* reading, the preacher is invited to hold a kind of a lecture on how people should live by the rules of their religion.

Suddenly Firaya closed her eyes and started to sing something very loudly and melodiously, "Don't be afraid. Now I will read to you the main *surah* of the Quran, its heart, which is called 'Believe in Allah'."

Firaya is convinced that after getting to know Islam during the courses at the St. Petersburg Mosque, was the moment she got her second wind. Her new religious identity gave her harmony. Everything fell into place. She started reading the Quran regularly, has learned how to be patient, and realised the value of family and home — the main strength of her religion.

She also started keeping up with other Muslim traditions such as the sacrifice of honour for a new life. When her grandchildren were born, Firaya went to Tatarstan and killed a lamb on the altar at the bottom of Hujalar tavy mountain. "We spill lamb's blood to prevent other bloodshed. I understand it is controversial, but we genuinely believe in it," Firaya explains.

ABOUT ISLAMOPHOBIA

When the conversation turned to radical Islamists, the amiable Tatar woman's face suddenly darkened. "ISIS and other radicals play hell with the Quran. They are playing upon Muslims' heartstrings. Those *shakhids* easily end it all on behalf of the selfish terrorism industry, not Islam. Real Muslims should dedicate their life to



Firaya Rashitova says that she feels to Allah now.

Photo credit: D. Hjorth

sacred duties," she said thrumming on the table. Firaya also noted that false Islam leads to chaos and downfall, while real religion appeals to the better side of our nature. It explains the value of modesty and virtue, not empty-headed violence.

We spill lamb's blood to prevent other bloodshed.

BACK TO THE MOSQUE

... Beyond the wooden doors, a gloomy, middle-aged man is sitting opposite to the preaching hall. He is responsible for the fundraising needs of Muslims living in Crimea, a world connected by the faith of Islam. He sees the woman enter the Mosque, winded, and sit down in one of the pews.

"We are giving a hand to all Muslims of our country. We are trying to help Crimeans to save their mosques, so they could let our brothers and sisters continue their life in a pure Islamic way and not to lose their identity," explains an attendant of the Mosque's secretariat.

Secretariat is a small, but very wealthy-looking room where two men sit offering blessings to families and visitors of the mosque. One of them is a former butcher

and is now praying for all Muslims entering this room; he does this without asking for payment or any contributions.

Firaya, devotees of the Mosque, organisers of Islamic events in St. Petersburg, and all other Muslims who have dedicated their life to Islam share a strong, common belief — helping others. To help others is to save and preserve their religious identity and to feel connected to Allah.



Valery Kuzmina Granddaughter of KGB captain. Isn't afraid of anything. Except perhaps spiders and Sean Penn.

STUDENT HACKS

Exams

One should never go to an exam wearing new clothes, nor wash their hair the day before an exam. This would risk washing away all accumulated knowledge.

Rituals

At midnight, on the night before important exams, students of Peterhof dormitories must open the window and scream *Halyava pridi* (Come thee freebie). In this way they summon knowledge back to them.

Disclaimer: Success not guaranteed!



PROSTITUTION REGULATIONS WORLDWIDE, NOW & THEN

Prostitution in Russia – sex sells, money making, sex trafficking, drug use, HIV, violence – a waste of lives, lives wasted, wasted people wasting their lives...STOP.



Advertising love in St. Petersburg.

Photo credit: D. Kopyciok

Prostitution is commonly called the oldest business in the world. The business of prostitution was established in many ancient cultures all over the world. The first brothels in China were founded under the statesman philosopher Kuang Chung in the 7th century B.C. with the intent to increase the state's income. In 5th century B.C. Greece, the Athenian lawmaker and lyrical poet Solon founded state brothels and taxed prostitutes on their earnings. Prostitution has also been called one of the "dirtiest professions", highly incompatible with long standing moral beliefs and vehemently opposed by religious institutions. They opposed more liberal sexual ethics and developed regulatory measures restricting or completely banning the practice in many countries.

Prostitution was prohibited in 596-601 under Reccared I, the Catholic king of the Visigoths of Spain. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa punished prostitutes travelling with the army in 1158 by cutting off their noses to make them less attractive. In 1254, the French King Louis IX deemed prostitutes "women of evil life" and ordered their expulsion from his kingdom.

PROSTITUTION LAWS WORLDWIDE

Today, there are varying legal approaches towards the regulation of prostitution and is still largely dependent on countries differing religious norms and tolerance towards the idea of commercializing sexual practices.

Globalisation has allowed for the comparison of competing legal approaches concerning sex work. In Bulgaria, Russia, Thailand, Canada, the US (excluding Nevada) and most other countries prostitution is illegal. The Netherlands, Germany, Mexico, Colombia, Turkey and Japan have, to varying extents, regulated and legalised sex work. There are regulatory differences between Germany and Russia (see box).

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF PROSTITUTION

International organisations that promote sex worker's interests, such as the International Committee of the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe argue that the term prostitution today is rarely differentiated, neither in societal nor legal terms. The term "prostitution" was the sole term used in the 19th and 20th century. After being associated with human trafficking,

Germany

The view of prostitution in the German society has significantly changed since the end of the 20th century and has impacted the regulatory framework previously influenced by religious authorities. In 2002, according to the Federal Agency for Civic Education, sex work was recognised equally to other occupations and is widely seen as the most liberal in Europe.

Due to legally binding and recognised contracts between sex workers and their clients or brothel owners, there is more security. Before, workers could face exploitation without rights to claim compensation for services that were provided. Additionally, access to medical care, insurance, a pension, legal protection and the ability to obtain employment or freelance contracts are now available.

Russia

Under Russia's constitutional regulations prostitution was declared illegal. According to the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation of 2001, organisation and operation of prostitution as a business is punishable by up to ten years in prison.

However, the selling of sexual services is punished with a fine of 1,500 to 2,000 roubles. The fine accounts for merely one-tenth of a worker's daily earnings, but in principle intends to prevent more people from entering into the sex business. Russian newspaper *Pravda* has deemed the existing laws "obsolete".

violation and enforcement to sex, it developed strong negative connotations leading to the stigmatization of the word.

Since the 1970s, the term "sex workers" emerged a commonplace to describe women, men and transgender individuals above 18 years old. who worked in the industry without coercion. Sex workers indicate the satisfactory state of working conditions and excludes those who have been selling sex or sell sex involuntarily as sex workers.

International's office in Russia, told the *Moscow Times*, "I'm not sure Russia will make the list of countries the organisation will first pay attention to [regarding the issue of prostitution]."



Maria Thiele *Researching solutions for prostitution regulations.*

DECRIMINALISATION AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

In countries where prostitution has been prohibited, business continued underground. This movement made prostitutes vulnerable to bribes, rape or being violated by clients, pimps and the police.

Amnesty International's 2015 report advocates for the decriminalisation of all aspects of consensual adult sex. The report took data from several UN agencies specialised on health issues and Amnesty's findings after a two year investigation to determine the working conditions that prostitutes, sex workers and sex worker organisations faced in various countries. The policy stance of Amnesty faced opposition from global anti-human trafficking organisations and feminist activists.

Currently in Germany, conservative party politicians from the Christian Democratic Union are collaborating with the Association of Erotic and Sexual Services to strengthen previously enacted legislation for sex workers vulnerable to human trafficking.

Sergei Nikitin, the head of Amnesty

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



No Whistling

ABBA sings: "Money, money, money! Must be funny! In the rich man's world", but Russian folklore offers concrete advice on how to manage your finances. For example, whistling at night will bring one financial trouble and it generally brings bad luck.

Poverty Purses

When you give someone a purse, make sure there is a coin inside. Unless of course it's an ill-intended gift and you wish endless poverty upon that person.

Million Dollar Baby

On the bright side, there are also ways to know whether being rich is in the cards for you at all. Unintentionally wearing your clothes backwards is directly linked to your financial prospects.

Also, when someone you know sees right past you because of a new haircut, don't take offense. It is actually great news because not being recognised by friends and family is also a sign of future riches.

MYSTERIOUS PLACES IN ST. PETERSBURG

A selection of the most mystical and fearsome places in the Russian imperial capital.

When I arrived in St. Petersburg, I decided to visit the places that are tied to the city's dark and sinister history. After doing some research online and talking to locals, I identified a few places of particular interest that share a mysterious past.

1

SMOLENSKOYE CEMETERY AT NIGHT

Smolenskoye cemetery after-hours is one of the scariest places I've experienced in St. Petersburg. Located in the centre of Vasilievsky Island, one can enter the cemetery through a small gate along Bering Street in the northwestern part of the cemetery.

It was dark when I entered the cemetery, one of the oldest but still active graveyards, and pure unadulterated fear swept over me. It's one that makes your heart beat faster and puts all senses on alert. In this state of uncertainty and insecurity, your mind starts to register every detail around you — like a twig cracking under your feet or flickering candlelights on fresh graves at a distance.

Stray animals roaming the cemetery, bushes rattling, spooky sounds and dancing silhouettes on tombstones add to the spine-chilling experience. It becomes unclear who you're terrified of more, the dead or alive, the ghosts and spirits, or just strangers passing by.

What makes Smolenskoye cemetery particularly scary is its forest-like state, as though the cemetery has been abandoned. And this could be explained by the cemetery's unfortunate history.

Built in 1756, Smolenskoye was a burial ground for both common and noble people. After the October Revolution, some of the more opulent tombs and monuments were severely damaged or destroyed. The cemetery also faced the possibility of demolition ordered by the local communist government.

Nevertheless, burials continue to take place at the cemetery, often with graves on top of each other.

It was not until recently that a decision on restoring Smolenskoye cemetery was made. However, there's still a long way to go. A large part of the cemetery is still in a dreadful state, undoubtedly contributing to its overall eeriness.

2

THE TOWER OF GRIFFINS

Another place in St. Petersburg surrounded by mysterious legends is an old wide chimney on the 7th line of

Vasilievsky Island. The chimney was a part of an old pharmacy located in a courtyard of the building.

Entering the building, you'll see a concierge up front. If you ask him politely about the tower and tip a hundred roubles, he'll open the door to the courtyard.

It is believed that the tower was named by superstitious locals who thought it was a nesting place for griffins.

If you're lucky, you might even spot white numbers on every brick of the tower. These numbers are rumoured to appear and disappear without reason.

Legend has it that the pharmacist, who built the chimney was an alchemist, worked day and night to develop the formula of happiness. It is believed that this formula is hidden in the walls of the chimney.

According to locals, the tower brings good luck to those who touch its bricks.

3

ROTONDA

The Rotonda, a round chamber with a staircase and discreet in appearance, often came up as a suggestion by locals. When I arrived at the address, I wasn't sure where to proceed.

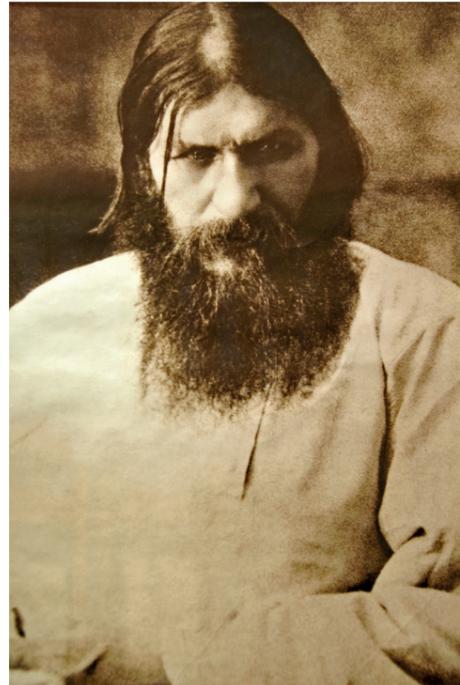
Some locals pointed me to an inconspicuous grey door to my left. The door was locked, but a sheet of paper attached to it instructed visitors on the rules of visiting the Rotonda. The instructions also suggested a donation of 50 roubles.

At 6 p.m. everyday, a gatekeeper comes and opens the door to the Rotonda. It was built in a house that belonged to a wealthy St. Petersburg merchant, also rumoured to be a member of a masonic lodge.

According to legend, occult rituals took place inside the Rotonda and it is believed to have functioned as a gateway to the other world. Until recently, the Rotonda was a favourite place for youth to hang out. It was filled with graffiti, various texts and scribbles including a large quote from Dante's *Inferno*, "Abandon hope, ye who enter here."

Unfortunately, the Rotonda lost its former allure when its tenants decided not to fight the unwanted intruders, but to accommodate them. They painted over the graffiti, displayed pictures and historical data on the walls, and set up a brochure stand in a corner.

The tenants also left a huge white carton board, where visitors can leave a personal message to the other world. The board is almost entirely filled with messages.



Grigori Rasputin.

Source: Wikimedia

4

RASPUTIN'S LAST HOURS

Grigori Rasputin was one of the most mysterious residents of St. Petersburg. He was a peasant, a religious mystic and a favourite of the Tzarina. He exerted a tremendous amount of influence on the royal family and shaped the events that defined the ruling of Russia's last Tzar.

I decided to start my tour from an apartment on Gorokhovaya 64, the last residence of Grigori Rasputin. (*See numerals I, II, III to follow this trail*).

The entrance into the courtyard is usually locked, but one can go in by following a tenant. Rasputin lived on the third floor, in the apartment with the windows facing the courtyard. It was rumoured that in the very same apartment, Rasputin had festivities that would turn into orgies.

Felix Yusupov, a young Russian grand duke, conspired to have Rasputin murdered by inviting him to dinner at the Yusupov Palace.

On the night of December 30, 1916, Rasputin boarded Yusupov's car from the building's courtyard never to return again.

Yusupov offered his guest some wine and pastries laced with cyanide and even though he ate it, he didn't die from it.

The murderers resorted to shooting the Russian mystic three times, with the final shot in the forehead. When the deed was done, Yusupov and his fellow conspirators drove towards Kretovsky Island to dispose of Rasputin's body.

The island is connected to Petrovsky Island via the Bolshoy Petrovsky Bridge. Even though the original wooden bridge was reconstructed in 2010, one can still imagine how four men dragged Rasputin's body and dumped it into the icy water of the Malaya Nevka River.

According to Rasputin's friend and

secretary, Aron Simanovich, Rasputin wrote a letter to the Tzar shortly before Rasputin's assassination:

"I feel that I will die before January 1. ... If I am killed by common men, you, the Tzar of Russia, will have nothing to fear for your children. They will reign for hundreds of years.

But if I am murdered by nobles and aristocrats, their hands will remain soiled with my blood for twenty-five years and they will leave Russia.

Brothers will take up arms against brothers, and they will hate and kill each other. There will be no peace in Russia for twenty-five years. The Tzar of the land of Russia, if the sound of a bell will tell you that Grigori has been killed; you must know this: if it was one of yours who have plotted my death, then none of your children will live beyond two years. And if they do, they will beg God for their death as they witness the disgrace of Russia, see the Anti-Christ coming, famine, poverty, destroyed temples of God, and desecrated sanctuaries where everyone would turn dead.

The Russian Tzar, you will be killed by the Russian people. They will be cursed and will serve as the devil's weapon, killing each other and causing death around the world."

The authenticity of this letter can certainly be debated and history shows that after Rasputin's death, the days of the Russian Empire were numbered. It only makes one wonder, would it turn out any different if the peasant from Siberia so close to the royal family hadn't died that night.



Mikhail Bonovsky was supposed to prepare an author blurb but instead went to the cemetery and never came back.

SAFE JOURNEY

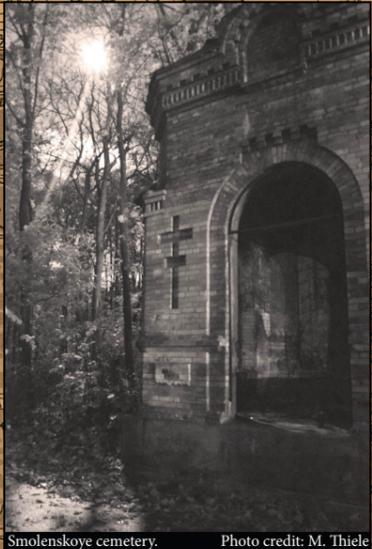
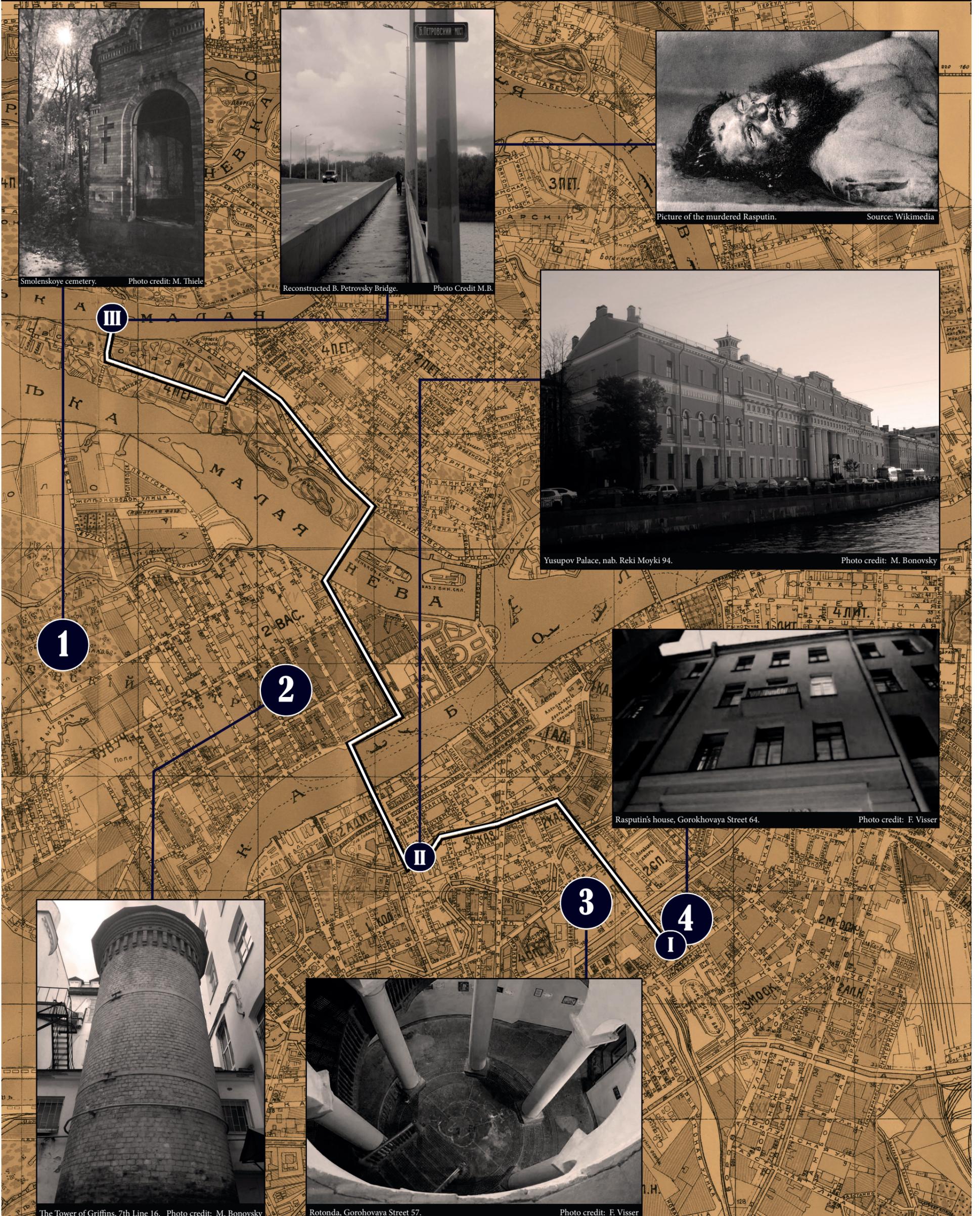
Travelling is always a bit stressful. Packing, remembering your passport, and let's face it, turbulence is scary! Russians have devised a verified technique to ensure that all goes smoothly on a long journey.

Sit Down!

After the hassle of packing is complete, right before you step outside and officially begin your trip, you must always — always — sit in silence for a few minutes. But don't you worry too much if you forget to do it once or twice. Our colleague Valery, who almost never fails to accomplish the ritual says that you can still make it without doing this. Only it is never recommended to mess with flight safety!



Saint Petersburg



Smolenskoye cemetery. Photo credit: M. Thiele



Reconstructed B. Petrovsky Bridge. Photo Credit M.B.



Picture of the murdered Rasputin. Source: Wikimedia



Yusupov Palace, nab. Reki Moyki 94. Photo credit: M. Bonovsky



Rasputin's house, Gorokhovaya Street 64. Photo credit: F. Visser



The Tower of Griffins, 7th Line 16. Photo credit: M. Bonovsky



Rotonda, Gorokhovaya Street 57. Photo credit: F. Visser

1

2

II

3

4

I

III

To: International Journalists
Address: Global Media.
1001 Cultures Avenue, 7th floor underground
Global Village

21st century

An Open Letter from an Unknown Culture

My dear friend!

I know we haven't gotten along very well for the past few decades and you are probably not expecting to hear from me. I am still angry and frustrated about the current state of the media, but I decided to respond to you anyway.

I am writing to you because I need you, because I cannot imagine a functional global society without you being committed to dig into the unknown truth behind my existence. I understand your fear. I am scared, too. There is a saying by one of my friends, "Persian Culture" which goes: "Facing the darkness, don't draw a sword. Light a torch!" I am offering you a chance to do so.

Why do so many of us seem hostile?

To us, we feel betrayed. As an introvert, I am still trying to show you my colours. Perhaps all that you and your friends have are patronizing perceptions and fictional depictions of us "Unknowns", but it does not justify your silence when we were being destroyed due to a perceived danger to cultural coherency in the world.

Where were you when we needed you?

You have to understand that your work is vital for the well-being of not only us "Unknowns", but all cultures. You see how politicians use people's fear of unknown cultures to increase their power over society? You see how intellectuals studied us as an exercise in the self-affirmation of their own cultural identities and not as an exercise of intellectual enquiry? The standards have been set where they are afraid of studying us in our own context. This is why we need you; this is why I need you. I need you to eradicate this fear from people.

It is not that I didn't notice your effort in getting to know me. I want you to know me. I want us to be friends. But my dear friend, with all due respect, don't be so arrogant in your ignorance. Just because you know how I dress, what I eat and what my celebrations and traditions are, does not mean you know me. Just because you speak my language to a certain point, you were able to communicate to my people to a certain point and you read about my history to a certain point, does not mean you can judge me as you like, write about me as you like and analyze me as you like. Let me make it clear. Just because you know me enough not to fear me, does not mean you are in the state of being in the know.

Now that I have time to absorb what we have been through, I can see why you have been using so many of your labels like human rights, diversity, tolerance, etc. trying to fit me in your conforming Global Village.

Oh my delusional friend!

The Global Village is such a heartwarming term, but I don't think we are members of a Global Village. We are lost citizens of a strange Global City, most of the time having absolutely no "true" knowledge of each other. We don't know each other, therefore, we fear each other; we fear that unknown part of ourselves that fears the unknown!

I still believe that the trust between us can go both ways. Here are my expectations from you if we are to work together again:

- Engage with me in identifying stories.
- Share your intentions with me as to why you want to hear my story. I want people to respond to me, not stare at me in your framed picture.
- Do not summarize me in an objectified way with sweeping terms.
- Try to get to know me in my context. Provide that context to your audience.
- Ah, you can get rid of your labels as well.

Finally, I want to go back to the saying from my friend: "Facing the darkness, don't draw a sword. Light a torch!" And if you can't light it right away, don't assume you have one and start telling about things you can't see in the dark. Give it awhile. Everybody knows that human eyes can adjust to the darkness!

Your humble friend,
Unknown Culture



Shima Vezvaei *Terribly scared of all the weird people living in the right hemisphere of my brain!*



Do you remember that time you wanted to say one thing, but it came out COMPLETELY wrong?

This embarrassing moment will flash back when you're ready to try again, causing anxiety and a feeling of defeat. But don't stress!

Failing is an important part of your language lessons – right along with adjectives, sentence structure and verbs. It's part of the journey to fluency.

Let's walk down that path through 6 different countries—a throw back to some of the funniest faux pas of language learning.



THAI TO ENGLISH

I didn't know how to pronounce the word "salad".

I said, "can you please pass me pepper? I need to put it on my slut."



I said Jesus can cleanse you from your *pedos* - farts instead of *pecados* - sins.

ENGLISH TO SPANISH

ENGLISH TO RUSSIAN



I said, "children have a hard time differentiating between good and evil."

Zlom means evil and I said *slan* which is "elephant". I was claiming the difference between good and elephants.

I wanted to tell this guy I liked, how much I enjoyed my day at the park:

I said, "C'était cool pour relâcher et jouir la journée" which actually means "It was cool for relaxing and orgasming in the park."

GERMAN TO FRENCH



GERMAN TO RUSSIAN

My first year students were practicing the phrase, "I have an older sister and an older brother".

Instead, they kept saying, "I have an ugly sister and an ugly brother"



One of my students was describing their first New Year's Eve: "Silvester wurde viel geschissen" which means there was a lot of "shitting" instead of "shooting" off of fireworks.



ITALIAN TO GERMAN



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First Line

This international issue was happily produced by the M.A. Programme Global Communication and International Journalism 2015.

Special thanks to Kamilla Nigmatullina.

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