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Opinion

There's development but no trust

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Marcus Ferrar is an Oxford journalist and writer who worked in Reuters for a number of years. He visited Russia in different times – 60s, early 90s, end of 2010s. Marcus has spent two weeks in Perm, met with local politicians, businessmen, civil activists. In his interview give to permcitubro.com he shared

News

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Smart life of modern cities

There's development but no trust

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his impressions after the visit.

— When we met before your visit to Perm, you said that you'd like to see real Russia. Now in your last days in Russia what do you think you could do it?

— Yes, I certainly could meet real Russia and the Russians and of different sorts. People who are political authorities, teachers, students, business people and people who engage in independent social undertakings for the benefit of society. So I got a good spread of people and beyond and it's very interesting.

I think it is more real Russia than Moscow or Saint Petersburg, because people don't think of themselves: "I am in Moscow, the great capital, St Petersburg, a beautiful city, where tourists come and so on". These were now Russians who work in a normal city and for me it was interesting to talk to normal Russians who just live.

— We can't compare this Russia and Russia of the 90's. But if we compare what has changed the most in your opinion?

— What has been gained is more stability, the possibility for people to live their lives normally and not be afraid whether their money is going to be paid or whether their salary is going to be lost or devalued. Whether they will lose their jobs from one day to the next. So, that is obviously a plus, things have gone up a bit.

But what I liked when I first came in the beginning of the 90's to Russia was this sense of freedom and exuberance, that everything is possible. Suddenly we're liberated to do what we can do, what we want to do and to use our talents the best we can. And I felt that especially in 91, 92. But of course then things went badly and there is no doubt it, there was a big economic upset and a catastrophe which came later.

It's a pity, that independence and exuberance – I don't feel that anymore. I feel people want to get on with their lives in a pragmatic way. They don't think about other people much, they don't think about any idea of society, they don't try to shake society...

Thinking for themselves, which is not wrong. You know, one has

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to do that and the young people have to plan their lives. But it doesn't go beyond that. There is a certain hardness about Russians, they don't care about each other much.

You know, lacking a feeling of community, where we all help each other and we do things to realize things as a community.

— According to your observations, what makes Russians happy and what makes them unhappy?

— I think it is that professional people, young professional people see that they have the possibilities to make good careers.

Lawyers, accountants, they see that if they are competent that they can make quite good careers. But questions come up about corruption. Sometimes if you want to do really good work, there is going to be somebody who says: "Stop and instead cheat".

That's something what they see as an obstacle in their everyday life, and they have to submit to some power, which they don't really agree with.

So, what makes them unhappy?... I suppose they would like to have higher standards of living. They know that in other ex-communist countries like Poland and Hungary, which had to go through a transition too, that this came much faster, their standards of living are much higher. So, they're thinking: "Why not us?" Well, not so much. And why are the streets outside our houses still broken?

— Before your visit, you had some ideas about Russia. Which were confirmed and which not?

— I've learned a lot which was new. I had ideas of Russia from various periods: the Communist period, later, in the Gorbachev years and in the early Yeltsin years and that's it. So I had no idea what to expect. What I find is a city in strong development. There is a lot change here., A man I was talking with today said: "If you come back in five years, I'm sure you'll find a Perm that is a lot better than it is now". I think he's right. Development, you can see it taking place, nice new buildings being put up, roads are being repaired bit by bit. Things are happening. I have a feeling it's a country full of promise, full of potential, but I suddenly think that it is being said about Russia all the time, ever since the beginning

of time. When is the potential going to be realized? That's the question.

— **What impressed you most and what disappointed you most in this visit?**

— What impressed me the most is the ballet. We visited the ballet school and I saw this very high quality teaching and the high tradition in this school, coming directly from Leningrad, Mariinsky and they still got it. That great Russian tradition of excellence in ballet, position and beauty, and the exuberance too.

We saw two ballet performances and there was no doubt, that the quality was extremely good. Much better that I could see in England, even in Covent Garden, significantly better. Especially the corps de ballet, which I think is a great strength of the Russian ballet. Everybody is doing the same thing, excellent. That's really what surprised me during the time. Also I really loved the Borodin opera "Prince Igor". That was exuberant singing too. Yeah, great, beautifully staged, scenery too, fantastic costumes and stage directions, and the whole interesting theme too.

— **And what disappointed you?**

— It's this monolithic attitude towards opinion, towards media and the main media. They're not trusting the people to take responsibility for their society. That's why the main media is boring, of course there's something interesting, but you don't feel that you are really learning what you want about the world. It's just being pushed on to you. It a bit sad, I find.

— **Did people talk about politics? Particularly about the relationship between Britain and Russia.**

— Very little. I think first, they were being good hosts, very hospitable and didn't want to bring up unpleasant subjects which might offend me. They were not terribly curious about it either. They said: "England is against us and the British government is against us and that's how it is". I found a certain defensiveness on the part of Russians, even a sense of fear. Fear of NATO, fear of the outside, of the outside powers, which I find is not really justified.

But I think this is a Russian tradition: huge frontiers, huge country, always seeing some danger here, some danger there. People were saying: “We’re afraid of NATO, they could be bombing Perm”. I thought: “You must be mad!” NATO is not going to bomb Perm and the only person who could be bombing Perm is Donald Trump, but he likes Putin.

I wonder where it comes from, this lack of confidence in Russia. It’s a pity, because it certainly doesn’t correspond with my own views. When they ask about the West, they tend to have this feeling already – the West is threatening us. I think: “Not really”.

— **When you return to Oxford and somebody asks: “What kind of Russia”, what will you say in one sentence?**

— It’s a country which is in a great stage of development, which is good, but which is holding itself back, by not trusting the people to do things themselves. That’s what, in one sentence.

— **You met many people in Perm, you have many impressions. What’s next? What are you going to do with this material?**

— I would like to write a book about the Russian people, how they live. I don’t want to write about the geopolitics. I don’t want to write about Putin. I don’t want to write about NATO. I don’t want to write about poisonings... everybody else does that.

I would like is to get more and more of the feeling of the Russian people, and what motivates them and where they want to take from their lives. Of course, I’m just at the beginning of this, the book is not going to be published soon. I’m going to try my best.



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