

The birch forests around Moscow are alive with the sound of children's voices, as families are dispatched to spend the summer at the dacha. But I'll stop there, because all this does not sound Russian enough. Not even to Russian ears.

Like winter, or indeed spring or autumn, summer has been disaster time in the national media. It started with a plague of locusts chomping their way through the crops in south-western Siberia, and moving westwards as if they were marching on central Russia. Then came the forest fires, more than 20,000 of them, whose smoke forced Boris Yeltsin to move dachas. Interspersed with the heatwave and the drought, the heavens opened and, in the north of the city, hailstones the size of golf-balls dented the bonnets of Lada and Mercedes alike.

Plague and pestilence have also been sweeping through the holy land. A hitherto unknown viral infection "most likely the Congo-Crimean haemorrhagic fever" according to Russia's senior health officials, has killed nine and hospitalised 136. Everyone around the village in the Rostov region, where the infection broke out, has been wearing surgical face masks. The latest pest is tick-borne encephalitis. Apparently, 16,000 people have been complaining of tick bites in Novosibirsk.

Life has been made no easier by self-styled reformers, robber-barons and free-market missionaries who have swept over the motherland like the horde of locusts. The health service, outside the privately endowed hospitals of the capital, is in tatters. For a people so firmly wedded to the dark side of life, the latest thing to take off on television is called "Disaster of the Week". It's 999, with a difference. Most people aren't rescued. They die.

The Russian Michael Buerk is a lugubrious bod with a funereal air, who announces a fresh crop of disasters at home and abroad: pedestrians mown down on the roads, plane crashes off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, buses falling into swollen rivers in Brazil. There's no message other than that there's really a lot of death around.

The same brooding tone is adopted by the weather forecaster. Bright and cheery for temperatures in their mid-70s? You must be kidding. Had I thought about the air pressure, or the humidity, or that ozone hole? They actually said it was better to stay indoors - this for a country with a winter seven-months long. I blame the language.

I ask a friend whether things have gone as calamitously as she expected, the stock reply is "narmalna" which literally means "as normal". It's by the riverbanks that the highest form of optimism is to be found. The saying goes: "Kharasho, tiplo i muchi ni kusaet" (It's hot, it's good, and the flies don't bite) - well, not unless they are ticks carrying encephalitis.

#5
From: "Dennis Whelan" <Whelan@RussiaLaw.com>
Subject: New policy on student visas?
Date: Mon, 26 Jul 1999

I'm writing to inquire whether others have encountered what appears to be a new policy at the US Consulate/Moscow with respect to student/exchange visas (F-1 & J-1) and perhaps non-immigrant visas generally.

Background: I'm in a law/consulting firm that works primarily in the environmental area -from environmental permitting and due diligence through "state environmental expertise" and environmental impact assessments. Over the past few weeks we have been besieged with inquiries regarding rejected F-1 & J-1 visas. Some have come from academic colleagues in Russia and the US, others from friends, clients, and business partners. Nothing like this has ever happened before - at most we've written a few letters a year in support of the visa applications of business partners.

The educational institutions on the US side range from elite liberal-arts colleges and universities through private high schools and language study programs. On the Russian side the rejected applicants include first-time students and students who have a US high-school degree and have been admitted to a US college; people who've never been in the States and people who've already held multiple long-term tourist/business visas; children from families of small means and children from some of the most influential families in Russia. Recently an old friend who has traveled to the States dozens of times, has a (still) successful business, and is dependent on US business partners enrolled in a language program at a West Coast university to improve her English. A consular officer told her that at age fifty-two she had no business being a student and that the consular officer was putting a notation in her file that would make it unlikely that she'd ever travel to the States again. The daughter of the senior officer at a western bank, a man who could well become Chairman of the Central Bank if Russia ever develops a decent banking system, was denied a visa because the consular officer insisted that she had "admitted" that her intention was to stay in the US and get a job there after finishing medical school (the girl is 17 and just starting college!). Her father and she are both certain that she said nothing of the sort - and both speak superb English.

If I had heard only one story like this, I'd suspect some kind of misunderstanding - perhaps hurt feelings on the part of the applicant, perhaps garbled communication between people who don't speak each other's language particularly well. But in this case there are more similar stories, all arising over the past few weeks.

I'd be interested in hearing from anyone with similar experiences. If this is a new consular policy, I'd help and suggestions on how to deal with it. It clearly seems to contradict formal US foreign policy and congressional intent as expressed in recent foreign aid bills.

#6

From: Alexander Yanov <alexanderyanov@accesshub.net>
Subject: Open Letter to Colleagues in the West
Date: Mon, 26 Jul 1999

Dear David, it's been a while since I've contributed to JRL. The piece I bring to your attention now is written for a new bilingual journal we are about to launch in Moscow on the basis of "Moskovskie Novosti." It's called *Evropeets/The Other Russia: a Journal of Pan-European Dialogue*. And its opening issue which may - if God smiles at us - see the light in early December is composed essentially of responses from around the world to this Open Letter to Colleagues in the West (which is in the attachment to this letter). We'll be glad to include among them any serious responses of JRLers.

Sincerely, Alex

A Way to Break the Deadlock?
Open Letter to Colleagues in the West

I do not suppose you will deny that the current situation both in continental Europe and post-Soviet Russia is something of a paradox.

To an outside observer at least it looks that, for all its apparent prosperity, something seems to be missing in Europe. Something, that is, more fascinating than the price of butter and more constructive than military hardware, to quote Hugh Setton-Watson. A common cause perhaps, an uplifting pan-European Frontier, a unifying mystic. After all, in the words of so competent an expert as Norman Davies, "Europe has not had a unifying ideal since Christendom's fragmentation" (and being the author of a history of Europe unrivaled for popularity, he ought to know what he is talking about).