

Author Lawrence Sheets answered some questions that I posed to him about his book Pieces of 8 and more generally about events in Russia.
Professor Evans

Question: In the last five years or so, I have started to hear a lot of Russian being spoken in grocery store lines in Northern Virginia. It really is quite striking. It has been my impression that people are leaving/fleeing Russia at a pretty high rate. I was wondering if you had any comment/insight on this.

Mr. Sheets responds: To be honest, as far as I know, emigration rates from Russia have actually been falling for several years. They hit a peak in the early-mid 1990s but the country actually has a small net inflow of immigrants: last year according to this site it was +0.29/1000 residents. Here is one source but there many more on the web: http://www.indexmundi.com/russia/net_migration_rate.html

As far as what you see in terms of increasing #s of people speaking Russian in some areas, here it is just a guess but Northern Virginia is fairly affluent and that may represent the fact that many Russian immigrants – both those who came in the 90s and the ones now – are simply more affluent. When I was living in Chicago in the early 1990s for example Russian immigrants I knew usually lived in more working class areas of the city....now perhaps many of them having built businesses or stable lives and are accordingly moving to areas like yours.

Question: I was curious about the whole process centered on Nicholas II (discovery of remains, reburial, canonization, memorial church construction. While it made a lot of press headlines, did Russians really care about any of that?

Mr. Sheets responds: It was quite a topic of discussion both in the Russian news and in terms of gossip, but the country at the time was still much worse off economically than it is now. We were surprised, for example, that when the royal cortege carrying the coffins drove through the streets of Ekaterinburg, many people did not even bother to look up or take too much notice. There were also less people in attendance at the church than one might have imagined.

Question: It is somewhat disheartening by the failure of so many of the pieces of 8 to become stable, semi-democratic, political regimes, although that was not altogether unexpected. Are there any signs anywhere that politics are stabilizing in Central Asia or the Caucasus (and Trans-Caucasus)?

Mr. Sheets responds: All of the states in C Asia and the Caucasus are arguably more stable than 20 years ago and all are wealthier than in the early 1990s. However, several of those more stable states are fully authoritarian and therefore stable. Also, the larger question is whether those “stable” systems are sustainable when many are governed by a single clan or family, and I think the answer to that is no.

Question: In a Washington Post article on 17 January, “Vladimir Putin says he’s Russia’s indispensable man, the author asserted that “Putin traces Russian stability and growth to his victory over Chechen separatists a decade ago. He implies that all good things have flowed from that reassertion of Russian national power.” Don’t you find it striking that the Russian leader would assert that he derives his political legitimacy from the Chechen debacle.

Mr. Sheets responds: It is not surprising to me as Putin rode to victory on “winning” the second – not first – Chechen war. What is surprising is that most Russians today according to polls do not even seem to care if Chechnya and several other N Caucasus republics remain in the Russian Federation or even want them “kicked out” – there are both racial overtones here but also complaints related the huge financial cost of maintaining – subsidies - them even though some, like Chechnya, basically run themselves as independent in all but name and are led by corrupt and/or criminal-type strongmen. Putin’s perspective is an imperial one in this respect: recently he said that Russia fought to subdue Chechnya for 300 years and therefore it was unimaginable that it or other parts of the N Caucasus would be “let go.”

Question: Finally, what would you say are the odds that the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 come off smoothly without any incidents? Myself, I do not think that the odds are good.

Mr. Sheets responds: Here I would say because of the relative proximity of the area to unstable places, there are definite security concerns, although this is true of almost anyplace today. I would think that the bigger concerns are some of those regarding the enormous cost, corruption and even if some venues do not function smoothly. Another risk is broad political instability in Russia. I don’t think it will begin as early as 2014 but no one thought that Putin would encounter such political problems in 2011 either.