

The NYT's Grim Depiction of Russian Life

As a top propaganda outlet pushing the New Cold War, The New York Times paints life in Russia in the darkest hues, but this one-sided depiction misses the reality of the increasingly vibrant country that Gilbert Doctorow sees.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Our five-week stay at our home in the Russian countryside was approaching its conclusion when I got an email from a friend in France asking me to comment on [an article](#) in *The New York Times* entitled "Russia's Villages, and Their Way of Life, Are 'Melting Away'."

The article surely met the expectations of its editors by painting a grim picture of decline and fall of the Russian countryside in line with what the author sees as very unfavorable demographic trends in the Russian Federation as a whole. The fact that his own statistics do not justify the generalization (a net population loss of a few thousand deaths over live births in 2016 for a population of 146 million) does not get in the way of the paint-by-color canvas. Nor does the author explain why what he has observed in a village off the beaten track in Northwest Russia, in precisely the still poor region of Pskov, gives an accurate account of country life across the vast territory of Russia, the world's largest nation-state.

As the author notes, the main source of income from the land of the town he visited was – in the past – linen. That cultivation turned unprofitable and was discontinued. Consequently, the able-bodied part of the population has been looking for employment and making their lives elsewhere (a process internal migration common all over the world, including the United States).

The author fails to mention that linen production is not a major agricultural indicator in Russia today, whereas many other crops are booming. Linen goes into the lovely traditional handicraft tablecloths and napkins sold to tourists at riverboat landings, and that is the extent of demand.

I could respond to the overriding portrait of countryside decay in the *Times* article by drawing on my observations a year ago from the deck of one of those riverboats navigating the canals and rivers connecting St. Petersburg and Moscow. From that deck and from the experience of walking around the little picturesque towns where we made stops, I understand that growing domestic Russian tourism has pumped financial resources into historic centers, like Uglich. They are coming alive, with infrastructure improvements and reviving trade.

But tourist sites are not going to be representative of the country at large, either. So I will instead use two sources of information that I am confident have greater relevance to the issue at hand. The first, and surely the most politically significant, comes from a couple of family friends who for nearly 50 years have spent summers at a parcel of land deep in the hinterland, 280 kilometers southeast of St. Petersburg, close to regional industrial center of Pikalyovo, (Leningradskaya Oblast) with its train station along the line linking the northern capital to Vologda.

My Own Eyes

The second source is my own experience in and around our property in Orfino, a hamlet numbering 300 inhabitants in the Gatchina district, also Leningradskaya Oblast, but 80 kilometers due south of St. Petersburg.

The homesteads around Pikalyovo were always hard to get to, with very poor local roads. There was no commercial infrastructure, so the bold and determined vacationers coming here had to bring most provisions for their stay with them. They were rewarded for their efforts by the produce grown in their gardens and by foraging for berries and highly desirable boletes and other wild mushrooms in the surrounding forests.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Russian economy followed suit in the 1990s, the Pikalyovo region suffered the kind of economic misery and population loss that the *Times* describes today in the Pskov region. Our friends saw that normal folks left, and the concentration of drunkards and thieves rose proportionately. The theft of anything of value in common space became acute when scrap metal scavengers pulled up kilometers of electrical cables for their copper content, leaving swathes of the district temporarily without electricity.

Pikalyovo came to the attention of national news during the 2008-2009 financial crisis when its three main industrial enterprises shut down, causing widespread misery. The best known of these enterprises, a clay processing plant owned by the oligarch Oleg Deripaska's conglomerate Basic Element, caused a major scandal when state television carried reports on how the factory had not paid its employees for months while the boss was seeking and obtaining government assistance with repayment and rescheduling of his foreign loans. In the spring of 2009, there were protest demonstrations in Pikalyovo that resulted in both Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin personally entering the dispute to pressure Deripaska to do the right thing.

The economic woes of the regional economic hub did nothing to improve the living conditions in nearby hamlets like the one where our friends have their parcel. Our friends started cutting back on their visits and missed a year or

two altogether. All of this would seem to confirm the storyline of the *Times* reporter, but the latest word from Volodya and Tamara overturns the storyline completely.

A Revival

A few weeks ago, our friends decided to go back to the property to prepare it for sale. They had had enough, they thought. However, once there, they discovered things were definitely looking up. A newly completed 35 kilometer highway makes their settlement much more accessible.

But, more importantly, the neighbors have changed – for the better. A retired colonel moved in a couple of years ago and started raising pigs, cows and chickens, offering meat, eggs and dairy products for sale, thereby ending our friends' need for brought-in provisions. His example attracted others. New and dynamic settlers are putting into practice the “return to the land” trend that is an undeniable feature of current Russian social life. Our friends have decided not to sell, and to spend more time on their property.

In legal terms, the parcel of land my wife owns in the hamlet of Orfino (population 300) is categorized as a “subsistence farm.” The nature of the farming to be done there even features in the plan attached to the cadastral registry: the 700 square meters where the house was built facing the “Central Street” can be used for fruit trees and vegetable garden; the back field of another 700 square meters is allocated for potatoes, cabbage and similar crops.

In the vernacular, however, together with the two-story planed log house we built here five years ago, the property is considered a “dacha,” a summer residence. Nearly one in two urban Russian households has a dacha.

Young people think of dachas as weekend getaway locations to hold a barbecue for friends and family. If they have a feeling for Russian traditions, it is where they take their Saturday *banya*, or sauna in dedicated outhouses heated by wood burning stoves and then socialize over a beer. Older folks and pensioners find this frivolous. In their view, the dacha is not so much a place to idle time away as it is a place of honest toil, working the land and communing with nature. And even some of the younger generation buys into the concept of growing their own organic foods on their land, thus getting along without industrially farmed supermarket produce, whether domestic or imported.

One hundred years ago, Orfino was populated mostly by wealthy merchants whose businesses were in the extended district. They lived here year-round in substantial houses, some of which have survived to this day. To the back of the houses, what were essentially barns were built on, and there they kept some

small livestock. No one in Orlino today keeps chickens, pigs, goats, not to mention cows. But they do till the land with great enthusiasm and look after their fruit trees and red berry shrubs.

The notion of subsistence farming suggests border-line poverty. But Orlino was never poor, and its residents are not indigent today. Oldsters whose pensions are inadequate are supported by their children or nephews/nieces' families living in the local towns, in the district capital of Gatchina 50 kilometers away, or even in St. Petersburg. In return, these relatives visit in the summer to spend some days of vacation and take advantage of the large lake on the edge of the hamlet, which is lovely for swimming or boating when the weather is cooperative.

Good Use of Land

The notion of subsistence farming also suggests tough practicality. But making good use of the land does not exclude aesthetic pleasures, and every parcel of land in the hamlet is decorated by flower beds showing great ingenuity and effort.

Similarly, in the last year the Orlino farmers have all gone the way of their brethren across Russia and invested in greenhouses made of pre-formed polycarbonate walls, most commonly resembling hoops in profile. Here they put in tomatoes, cucumbers and other highly prized vegetables for their dining table which do not do well in the short growing season of the North, and in the very adverse climatic conditions which were exemplary this year in terms of cool temperatures and incessant rains. Given the expense of these greenhouses, the investment is not so much economically justified as it is a point of pride in self-sufficiency and green-thumb skills.

Electricity is the only utility that spells dependency for Orlino residents. Otherwise, each household has its own well, its own septic tank system, its own gas cylinder for the cooking stove and its own supply of birch logs for a wood-burning stove that is the mainstay of heating.

Many households have cars. The most recent arrivals, being by far the most prosperous, often have four-wheel-drive utility vehicles. This is a valuable benefit given the deplorable condition of many local roads. But then there is a significant minority who depend on the local bus system to get around. It is cheap, runs to schedule and gets you from point A to point B without fuss. The hamlet has a couple of grocery stores, so that staples are always available within easy walking distance.

An Economic Hub

For luxuries, there is the town of Siversk 10 kilometers away. Numbering perhaps 10,000 people, it is the local economic hub, with several factories, including a manufacturer of good quality upholstered furniture.

Siversk has a train station with hourly connections to Gatchina and St. Petersburg. It also has several supermarkets run by major national retail chains, so that you will find exactly the same product assortment as in St. Petersburg or Moscow. And there are a number of high quality specialty food stores and at least one bakery which is indistinguishable from what you might find in Vienna or Frankfurt

In the not so distant past, even urban Russians had not much interest in salads or in fish. Chicken legs or sausages or pork cutlets for the barbecue were what folks shopped for as main courses. Now even our Siversk stores offer pre-packaged mixed lettuce salads or rucola coming from greenhouse complexes in Greater St. Petersburg.

And the leading fish store offers not only salmon steaks from Scandinavian producers, but several varieties of delicacy fish from Europe's largest fresh water lake, situated 50 kilometers to the east of St. Petersburg. Still more impressive is the assortment of fish coming down each day from Murmansk: excellent flounder and superb *gorbusha*, a wild salmon usually considered to be a Pacific Ocean variety but also available in the waters north and west of Siberia. For those with deeper pockets, the fish vendor in little Siversk occasionally offers a fresh sterlet, the magnificent 1 kilogram-size representative of the sturgeon family that is farmed on the Volga in Astrakhan, far to the South.

I offer these observations from shopping to make the following point about the Russian country life as I see it: a lively economy with a population growing ever more sophisticated and aspiring to the good life.

The Lower Strata

When I shared these thoughts with my friend in France, he shot back: what about the lower strata of society? How are they faring?

My ready response draws on my five-year acquaintance with our "average Joe" neighbor in Orino, Sergei. When we settled here five years ago, he drilled our artesian well, installed the electric pump and all sanitary plumbing in our house. Now he winterizes the house each year and keeps an eye on the property when we are away, for compensation to be sure, but more out of friendship, because he has other, more lucrative sources of income as a subcontractor or day worker on local construction projects. There is a lot of work of this kind now

that Orlino's fallow fields are slowly being converted into housing estates.

Sergei is a master of several building trades. He also drives a tractor. He is mechanically gifted.

Sergei is about 55, the father of a grown son and daughter, the grandfather of two. When we first met, he was living in an apartment in a multi-unit wooden house dating back 60 or 70 years that was neither comfortable nor attractive. In the past three years he has realized a long time dream and built for himself a two-story cement block house, now clad in siding. The interior space is perhaps 250 square meters. When you pass it from the road, in a row of several other very substantial recent houses, you would place it as solidly upper-middle class. And next to his house Sergei has put up a very fine and large greenhouse. Beyond that is an extensive field of splendid potatoes and vegetables.

To be sure, the second story of Sergei's house still needs work and he and his wife live now only on the ground floor. Moreover, the investment of all spare cash into the house has scuttled other needs. When Sergei's ancient Toyota pick-up finally rusted into irreparable condition, he found himself without motorized transport. Until further notice, until he can put together the down payment for a new vehicle, he gets around town on a bicycle.

Sergei is no fool. He gripes about local corruption and terrible roads. But on the whole he is satisfied with his lot and optimistic about the future. Any belt-tightening that has been made necessary by Western sanctions he takes in his stride. He is resolutely patriotic.

I realize full well that the observations taken from my personal experience of the Russian countryside and from the experience of close friends is anecdotal and so not statistically significant. But then neither are the observations of *The New York Times* reporter.

Russia is a vast land and you can pretty much find what you are looking for there. Nonetheless, the gross economic statistics published by Rosstat are upbeat and fully contradict the notion of a country in decline, including its rural component.

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