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The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!

by Pat Burak

"Russian mentality is not based on common sense...It has nothing to do with common sense. Our thinking is not orderly, logical. In Western culture...emotion is considered to be on a lower level than reason. But in Russia, no. It is bad to be rational, to be smart, clever, intelligent and so on. And to be emotional, warm, loving, maybe spiritual, in the full meaning of that word—that is good."

(The New York Times, 10/28/90)

This analysis by Tatyana Tolstaya, a contemporary Russian author, may be helpful in discussing the implications of admitting students from Russia, Ukraine, Belorus, or any of the other former republics of the now dissolved USSR.

The history of this Slavic people, isolated and indoctrinated under a centralized and highly structured communist regime for almost 75 years, must be considered in the application process. Theirs is a unique mentality and personality, presenting challenges to the admissions officer, credential evaluator, foreign student adviser and dean. However, in this era of the global community, it is a nature we must understand and from which we can learn a great deal in terms of patience, perseverance and ingenuity.

Ten years ago the number of Soviet students studying in the U.S. was insignificant. That is changing. The 1990-1991 issue of *Open Doors*, published by the Institute of International Education, reports that in 1990, 1,210 students from the Soviet Union were in the U.S., ranking them 59th among all countries. Twenty-four percent were enrolled in two-year institutions; 76 percent in four-year institutions; 55.5 percent at public institutions; and 44.5 percent at private schools. Of these, 55.6 percent were undergraduates; 27.7 percent were graduates, and 16.7 percent were listed as "other." Of the 1,210 students, 294 were enrolled in English language programs.

The student from the former Soviet Republics is highly motivated to study in the United States. A degree from the U.S. is extremely valuable for future advancement, and the added allure of living in a Western country for a few years is compelling.

Consequently, access to the admission process is highly competitive. Ask any student from the former Soviet Union to explain how s/he managed to apply to a U.S. institution, take the TOEFL and GRE and obtain the necessary documents (i.e. external passport, exit visa, U.S. visa), and invariably the answer will be "luck!"

One reason is that class distinction is by no means absent from this supposedly classless society which espouses equality for all. In reality, sons and daughters of Communist Party officials have had far more opportunity for study abroad than any other group. Bright, hard-working members of the Communist Youth Group Komsomol (now defunct) also had more access. Certain universities and institutes had networks into the application processes and were better able to steer their favored students through the complex, bureaucratic procedure.

Another interesting phenomenon is that people who are really outstanding academically are not treated well. Under communist ideology, to be really better than your peers is not good—and those who are perceived as exceptional are not given the chance to study abroad. A sort of reverse psychology is in operation here: "You are already privileged because of your talent and ability; why should you receive even more by studying abroad?" Hence, U.S. institutions may not always receive applications from the "best and the brightest," but from the lucky chosen few.

What kind of students, then, are these "lucky chosen few," and why do U.S. institutions want them?

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For the most part, these students are highly skilled in mathematics and science, and enthusiastic about pursuing graduate work in these fields. As one department chair explained, "Americans become MBAs and lawyers. It's a very good thing this country has been able to attract excellent scientists from abroad because of our outstanding reputation for graduate education."

Departments are aware of the potential problems with applications from the former USSR, but most department heads are knowledgeable and select their students carefully. The scientific world has a reliable network among emigrés already in the U.S. who can recommend students from Russia, Ukraine, or other former republics, and these recommendations are sound.

In the social sciences and humanities, departments are trying to create a diverse student population. These students may look particularly interesting to the institution for a variety of reasons: institutional interest in developing exchanges with former Soviet republics; faculty research on comparative governments, economic systems, literature, language, international relations and political systems; and personal linkages with institutions or academics in the former USSR.

Future Enrollment Pattern Uncertain

The future enrollment pattern for students from the former republics remains to be seen. In 1990, the Soviet Educational Attaché predicted a significant increase in numbers of matriculated graduate and undergraduate students by 1995. With the dissolution of the USSR, it is unclear now how the growth pattern will be affected. In any case, several concerns should be considered when planning for those applications which will appear.

The application itself is difficult for a Slavic language speaker to interpret. Our terminology does not translate well, and often English-speaking friends are called upon to help complete forms and write essays or narrative responses.

The educational systems also are not easily comparable, especially at the graduate level. The second degree, the *Kandidat Nauk* or Candidate of Science, received after a minimum two years of research and the writing and defense of a thesis, is claimed by applicants to be equivalent to a Ph.D. awarded in the United States.

"Americans become MBAs and lawyers. It's a very good thing this country has been able to attract excellent scientists from abroad because of our outstanding reputation for graduate education."

The *Doktor Nauk* or Doctor of Sciences, which Americans view as the equivalent of the Ph.D., is awarded only after a number of significant scholarly accomplishments demonstrated over a decade or more of research and publications—an honor scholars seldom receive before they are in their late 30s or 40s. *Kandidat* holders may feel they are more on a par with post-doctoral researchers in the U.S., but are enrolled in graduate programs as beginning doctoral candidates. This leads to confusion at best, resentment in some cases, and discouragement with a graduate program in some situations.

The issue of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and GRE (Graduate Record Examination) testing is of major concern. Testing is available at only a few centers in the major cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, and now Kiev). The U.S. Consulate, ACTR (Association of College Teachers of Russian) and IREX (International Relations Exchange Board) offer these tests for rubles, but the cost of the TOEFL is currently 1,500 rubles, approximately 1-1/2 months' salary. Application fees for U.S. institutions are almost impossible to remit, as the ruble is still non-convertible (this is expected to change in July 1992). U.S. institutions must be flexible in postponing or waiving some fees or even test scores when the applicant is otherwise admissible.

In the past, some refugees had difficulty obtaining their academic records, as transcripts were withheld from them. Students now generally have access to a transcript of their academic work. A *diplom*, issued upon completion, is accompanied by a transcript that is often hand-written or sometimes typed. Universities do not provide more than the original copy, and copying facilities remain very limited.

Evaluation of Transcripts Puzzling

Evaluating transcripts from translations can be puzzling to credential evaluators. Often theoretical work and practical work (i.e. labs), which are listed separately on the Russian transcript, are combined in the translation, with a resultant discrepancy in the number of courses listed, number of hours attributed to the course, etc. Careful reading of the documents and thorough understanding of the Russian educational system are essential.

Letters of recommendation are difficult to obtain. Professors are reluctant to write them for two reasons: first, a concern about the loss of talent to the West, and second, a subtle but prevalent resentment of the opportunities now available to the younger generation which were unavailable to the post WWII generation.

Letters rarely extol the virtues and attributes of aspiring students, and those

that do should immediately be suspect. The student's genealogy is probably more significant than his/her merits.

"Choices" a Difficult Concept

Choosing a program of study is a difficult concept for students who come out of the former Soviet system where choice was not an element of their education. As a result, students often make poor choices of majors, misinterpreting or completely misunderstanding their options. Some allowance must be made for this cultural difference. A scene from the movie, "Moscow on the Hudson," graphically depicts the Russian's problem with choice. Robin Williams, playing a Russian defector, roams a grocery aisle in the U.S., overwhelmed by the varieties of coffee on display. He finally faints, calling out in utter bewilderment, "Coffee, coffee, coffee!" It is not far from the reality students face when presented with university catalogs offering dozens, if not hundreds, of courses.

A final issue to be mentioned in the application process relates to the very sophisticated behavior adopted by students from the former USSR as a way of evading administrative bureaucracy, perhaps as a self-defense mechanism. This has implications for the western university administrator who expects all procedures to be followed exactly, on time, accurately and forthrightly. These expectations run contrary to well-established behavioral patterns of the Slavic applicant; requests for waivers, special concessions, etc. must be expected.

Financial Resources a Problem

The admission process only begins with the completed application, test scores, letters of reference and assistantship award. An assistantship, fellowship or scholarship is absolutely essential, as students from the former Soviet republics are unable to finance their education from their own resources. Relatives in this country might be able to support a minimal standard of living, but tuition is generally prohibitive. If institutions want to admit these students, they are going to have to provide the necessary financial resources.

The student, once in receipt of the coveted immigration document (Form I-20 for the F-1 visa; Form IAP-66 for the J-1 visa), faces a series of obstacles in exiting his/her home country. An external passport must be obtained, an exit visa approved, and a U.S. visa acquired at the American consulate or embassy. Until recently, visa services were only available in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Delays of two-three months were not unusual. The opening of the U.S. consulate in Kiev, Ukraine on June 15, 1992 should help expedite this process for Ukrainians and ease the congestion at the sites in Russia.

Transliteration of Slavic names presents yet another hurdle. There are four systems of transliteration in operation, and people seem to use them interchangeably. This leads to mass confusion and further delays in visa issuance in some cases. A good practice is to ask your student to send you a copy of the passport page on which the Slavic name has been officially transliterated into English. Then, if your I-20 or IAP-66 has used a different transliteration, fax the State Department Office of Soviet Union Affairs, attention Gladys Boluda (FAX (202) 647-3506) and ask that the American Consulate be informed of the inconsistency. Visas have been held up for months due to this problem.

The purchase of an airline ticket is another complicated, difficult task. The cost is incredibly inflated and out of reach for many ordinary Russian citizens. It is not unusual for a graduate ▶

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department to advance the costs of transportation, paying for the airline ticket against the student's assistantship stipend. Admittedly, this is a leap of faith on the part of the institution but one that many departments would choose to take rather than lose a potential graduate student. Requests for help of this sort by the student should never be rejected out of hand before consultation with all concerned parties, including the faculty adviser, department chair, and perhaps even the Dean of Graduate Studies.

The arrival of this highly motivated student can be a shattering experience when s/he is faced with the brutal consequences of the lack of funds. Transportation from the airport to campus requires money. Food, housing deposits, books and health insurance are a few of the initial expenses.

Departments should be advised to provide a petty cash loan of $100-$200 upon arrival, and students should be met at the airport. Credit accounts should be set up at the campus bookstore. Landlords or university residence offices should be asked to waive the security deposit, or to spread it out over an extended period.

Finally, life in the U.S. differs significantly from life in the former Soviet Union. An entire volume could be devoted to this subject, but only a few differences will be mentioned here.

Under the communist system, financial transactions for the ordinary citizen were made in cash. The student's familiarity with banking, interest, credit and payment plans and a checking account is nil. One must take responsibility for educating these students in this regard, or major problems could result.

Social Security numbers, "PIN" numbers, health insurance, federal, state and FICA taxes are yet other mysterious concepts. The language skills of the student may be excellent, but it is the classic case of describing the elephant to the blind man. S/he cannot understand the terms we use because the concepts are so foreign.

In summary, the issues and concerns related to the admission of students from the former Soviet Union are complex and challenging. However, a bit of extra effort on our part can yield great results. ■

About the Author: ***Patricia A. Burak*** *is the Director of the Office of International Services at Syracuse University and the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She is currently serving on the NAFSA national team of CAFSS (Council of Advisors to Foreign Students and Scholars). She was the editor of the NAFSA publication* "The USSR: An Educational Exchange Profile."