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SOCIAL SCIENCE: THE POST-SUPERPOWER WORLD

Russia's youth ready to embrace the dawn of a new era

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Hard to believe, as we enter a thoroughly globalized world in 2009, that as an elementary-school student, I crouched under my desk every time an air-raid siren pierced the unsteady calm. I was born in 1957, the year of Sputnik, and my first political memory is of John F. Kennedy announcing that he would "stand up" to Russia during the Cuban missile crisis. Back then, in the United States, we grew up believing that we were engaged in a titanic struggle against a mortal enemy whose very existence threatened our creed of individualism, freedom and liberty.

But when I visited Russia this month, I was struck at how similar it has become to the United States. Certainly, the country is pushing to develop more of a market-based economy, having abandoned its state-run economy to the historical dustbin. But it's more than that.

In Russia, as in the U.S., everything is big. People are loud and aggressive. Many are overweight. The roads are clogged with gas-guzzling SUVs. Billboards advertising luxury products dot the sky, and women walk around covered in designer labels - most of which, as in the U.S., are knock-offs. In a Moscow airport café, two young women are transfixed by the Russian version of InStyle magazine, poring over pictures of Sarah Jessica Parker, Paris Hilton and Scarlett Johansson.

And, just like the U.S. then and now, Russia is security-crazed - from the contortions required to obtain visas to airport checkpoints, from the suspicion of anyone taking a photo in a restaurant or hotel to the metal detectors at the entrances of official buildings, even the security gate at my hotel's front door. Police sirens blare into the night, reminding me of city life in the U.S.

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But it's among the youth that the similarities between Russia and the U.S. become eye-popping.

While older Russians still appear to smoke and drink too much - evoking a U.S. culture more typical of the 1950s *Mad Men* era than the present - young Russians, with their jeans, T-shirts, BlackBerrys and iPhones, are virtually indistinguishable from their Western counterparts.

I had been invited to Moscow along with *Megatrends* visionary John Naisbett, Garage Technology Ventures start-up guru Guy Kawasaki and billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson to take part in a conference on innovation and entrepreneurship, meant to encourage a new generation of techies to launch start-up companies in Russia.

Even as someone who has written about the growth of a new global creative class worldwide, I was struck by how much entrepreneurial zeal there was among Russia's young generation.

I asked our interpreter and guide - a twentysomething foreign affairs staffer - what could account for it. Three things, he said.

One is globalization. Young Russians are well aware that they are part of a global economy, a global lifestyle and growing global class.

The second cause is communication. With international distribution of television and movies (including the Russian version of the recent Hollywood comedy *Baby Mama*), the boom in Internet and social media, the country's young people are participating in cutting-edge trends.

The third is language. Young Russians (of whom he is a perfect example, he said) are speaking more and better English. When I addressed a class in Siberia last year, many of the students (a self-selected group for sure) engaged me in perfect English, asking questions that mixed academic insights with of-the-moment slang. I couldn't help but feel that these young Russians had developed capacities that even exceeded so many of their North American peers. They seemed perfectly poised to navigate our global economic terrain.

As I sat in the fashionable Pushkin Café near the Kremlin and Red Square one evening, musing that the bustling nightlife around me could just as easily been that of Toronto, New York or London, it occurred me: I was witnessing the dawn of a new era. The age of the great superpower conflict - of a generation and a world defined by the Cold War - is over. While both countries remain powerful in their own ways, they are now subsumed in a global economy that is bigger than either of them.

At the conference, John Naisbett spoke of the rise of Asia, and especially of China as not just the world's factory but as a growing centre of research and innovation. He described new universities, new research institutions (including one that he runs), high-speed trains

and the striking, architecturally significant new airport terminals being built there. The contrast between an emergent society in the throes of rapid expansion and older societies that are living off the past and failing in many ways to embrace the 21st century could not have been clearer.

While Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International, describes a post-American world defined by the rise of the rest, I now think of our era as that of a post-superpower world. The energy has shifted, and been unleashed, and it's not just a wide range of countries that matter, but mega-regions such as the Beijing-

Shanghai corridor, the Mumbai-Bangalore axis, greater Toronto and its environs, Cascadia in the Pacific Northwest, and all throughout Asia, Europe and across the world - everywhere the Internet and global airwaves now reach.

Language, communication and openness to new ideas - these are now the drivers, whether you find yourself in New York or Toronto, Amsterdam or Moscow.

It will be interesting to see how the first post-superpower generation in the U.S. and Russia handles the looming economic crisis. Judging from the ubiquitous Louis Vuitton purses and InStyle readers in the Moscow airport, populations in both countries appear to be in denial about the prospect of a full-fledged depression. Americans still pacing the malls fervently wish that some combination of government bailouts, Federal Reserve action and the incoming Obama administration will save them. Russians cannot bear to think back to the late 1990s, when they last faced an economic fallout, and have stockpiled savings and foreign reserves in the hopes of avoiding it, even in the event of a stock-market collapse.

But it's also clear that we share more connective tissue. A truly global creative class has emerged and is growing. We are all much more connected and similar than ever before - much more so than when we cowered under our desks at the threat of mutually assured destruction when I was in grade school.

Call me an optimist, but that fact bodes well for our shared future.

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