

Four Russian journalists: A letter from Moscow

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In late March a group of visiting young Russian journalists who cover the parliament in Moscow visited Washington, D.C., and Madison, meeting a variety of academic, political, and media figures.

They were asked to share their impressions.

The visit was sponsored by Open World, a U.S. congressional program and hosted locally by Friendship Force of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Access is granted

The laws of the United States declared freedom of speech and authorities seem to be trying to symbolize such openness for visitors from other countries.

Our delegation of journalists from public and private media invited through the Open World Program was well received and given the chance to visit Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. and the Wisconsin Capitol in Madison several days later.

It is a very particular experience to visit the American Capitol for a Russian person. Impressions are made at the very entrance – anyone can access the Capitol building without buying a ticket or having a special entrance permit. Even homeless can sit during the working hours on the benches of Capitol in the winter time. Perhaps American readers will not understand our amazement, but in Russian regions free access in governmental buildings is not permitted; it is under the police

surveillance. The governor's office located in proximity to the Congress, as in Wisconsin, is under strict surveillance, too. There are some exceptions: after the annexation of Crimea to Russia in the first months the local parliament was circled by people's militia.

Differences can be found in the capital of Russia as well. The fact is that in Russia, voters rarely know which elected official represents them in the parliament and are not aware that they can schedule an appointment with their representative. Elected officials, especially those representing the ruling party, rarely are ready to entertain direct dialog with the electorate. Therefore it is difficult to imagine welcoming messages on the office doors of elected officials or a sign saying, "This office belongs to the citizens of District N" as you can see in the American Houses of Representatives. You cannot say that the Russian Parliament is inaccessible to people – sometimes they give tours to students and even hold parliament hearings – but it is difficult to imagine people eager to visit it as a place of national attraction or museum.

– *Maxim Ivanov*

A man between donkey and elephant

On this trip I was hooked by the polarization of Republicans' and Democrats' views. Even good ideas (like legalization of marijuana in Wisconsin) can be buried under disagreements and stubbornness of people for whom it does not matter who you are: a donkey or an elephant. A donkey is considered in Russia to be stubborn, and an elephant – heavy. It would be desirable that the truth be born in the combination of these two qualities, but so far it turns out that politicians argue, and the population also argues and suffers (your opinion polls speak about a high level of discontent with the work of the Congress). However, it is a great value that you, as citizens, are preoccupied and interested in the political aspects, that you have time and energy for it.

It is difficult to explain, just in a few paragraphs, my surprise with obvious things to Americans who most likely saw Russians only in Hollywood movies. But in my country most of citizens do not believe in politics and the opportunity to change something. Also, it is hard to imagine that in one of the small cities of Russia, that a 70-year-old retiree will lobby against the bill that would try to decrease the number of practice hours for the hospice nurse while this retiree is receiving a pension from the government that allows her to travel the world. I am very impressed by the

senior citizens quality of life, their independence and activism. This approach gives hope. Continue fighting for your ideals and try to give back to America its trust for the Congress.

- *Olga Churakova*

But what about the flag?

I personally was struck, not as a journalist but as an ordinary person, by the American attitude towards the problem of the freedom of speech in the modern world. It turned out that for them it is a kind of absolute value, for which they are ready for virtually any sacrifice. As an example, I asked my interlocutors here - a former member of the state Legislature and the director of public television in Wisconsin: Does this freedom have limits? What if an American says or does something offensive to fellow citizens? And if someone burns the American flag in front of everyone who may have fought for it in Vietnam or in other hot spots, and saw how his colleagues died for this symbol? "We have veterans who talk about these cases, that they fought for the rights, including these people," they told me. Having thus understood how popular Voltaire's ideas are here. Then I asked: What if unlimited freedom of speech will be used by terrorists to recruit young Americans, who can potentially become the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the United States? I was told that freedom of speech cannot be partial - either it is existing, or it does not. I treat this view with respect. However, it is difficult to not be surprised by the fact that, as we were told, employees of the same public television of the state are prohibited to disclose their political preferences in the social networks. It turns out that terrorists can promote joining their ranks, but local journalists cannot promote their own politics?

Also, I was impressed by the warm welcoming of the Wisconsin people from Friendship Force, showing once again that chilled relationships between our governments are not in the way of building a solid friendship between people.

- *Aleksey Tsypin*

Studying each other

It turned out that the capital of Wisconsin is closer to Russia than I thought earlier. So, during the visit, I learned that the University of Wisconsin has a project of collaboration with Russia: young scientists from the United States could visit our

country, learn about the Russian Federation, and exchange experiences with their colleagues. At the same time, I was surprised by the stereotypes Madison residents have about our country, such as: Russia interfered with the elections in the USA; relatives of Americans who want to visit Russia are very worried about them and advocate against their trip; citizens of the Russian Federation are not allowed to travel abroad freely; relatives and friends of Russians who visit the United States are worried about them and oppose travel ... These are only some of the stereotypes about Russia and Russians voiced by Madison, Wisconsin residents. To list all of them could probably occupy a whole newspaper page.

At the same time, despite obvious prejudices and misconceptions about Russia, many Wisconsin citizens we met were ready to change their opinions about Russians, were interested in dialogue and are eager to learn as much as possible about our country.

- *Marina Alekseeva*