

Discrimination Against Russian Speaking Americans Is Wrong

Ronn Torossian, CEO, 5WPR

Had lunch with a friend of mine yesterday who was born in Russia, moved to New York City when he was three years old and has lived here his whole life, whispered to me at a posh Upper East Side restaurant he is ashamed of his name and is regularly discriminated against.

As one who works and socializes extensively with Russian speaking Americans its not the first time in recent years I have heard it and it is not right. Discrimination against the three million Russian Americans in the United States seems to be one of the few politically correct biases today. Across political, business and pop culture, Russian-Americans today are perceived as gangsters, spies or prostitutes and it is wrong.

While “Russian mafia” headlines blare every time a Russian does something wrong, there are many misperceptions of the few million Russian emigrants to America which are prevalent in the media. This community has had a tremendously positive impact on America and the world – and it shouldn’t be overlooked.

Wrongly, this bias appears to cross all lines.

This week headlines blared about Alexander Vindman, a United States Army lieutenant colonel who serves as the Director for European Affairs for the United States National Security Council (NSC). Vindman came to national attention in October 2019 when he testified before the United States Congress regarding the Trump–Ukraine scandal.

He has received a Purple Heart for his heroic actions during the Iraq War.

He moved here from the former Soviet Union when he was three – he's the quintessential American success story and should be treated as such.

Sean Duffy, a former Republican congressman said on CNN of Vindman, "He is a former Ukrainian. He wants to make sure that taxpayer money goes in military aid to the Ukraine. I don't know that he's concerned about American policy." Duffy warned that Vindman "speaks Ukrainian" and "has an affinity" for Ukraine. Duffy – shamefully ended by saying of Vindman, "I can't judge whether he puts America first."

Shame on Duffy. Vindman is a man who serves our country, who has security clearance at the highest levels. He emigrated here as an infant with his family to chase the American dream and is a model citizen. Regardless of politics, maligning his intentions is wrong, and surely has nothing to do with his place of birth.

Len Blavatnik, the Ukrainian-born and Russian-raised billionaire businessman is one of the world's richest – and most generous – men having given away \$500 million to charity, including to world-renowned universities like Oxford, Harvard, Stanford and Yale. Mr. Blavatnik is a US and UK citizen and a graduate of the American university system. Blavatnik was knighted by Queen Elizabeth for services to philanthropy, and has made the world a better place.

Yet, because of his place of birth he is regularly maligned in the media, despite the fact that he has lived in this country for the past 40 years. It's wrong.

It crosses to business. A few years ago Eugene Kashper of New York private-equity firm TSG Consumer Partners, who purchased Pabst Beer had to refute rumors that the iconic beer company was bought by a Russian. The Huffington Post accused 44-year

old Kashper – who emigrated to America at the age of 6, his parents forced as Jews to flee communist Russia – of “defecting to Russia,” while the Daily Beast said Pabst “will now take orders from Russia.”

A successful-self made American was unfairly forced to defend blatant untruths simply because his first name was Eugene.

That is called bias and wouldn't be tolerated if it happened to Chinese or Mexican émigrés – nor is it acceptable that it happens to Russians.

America's three million immigrant and ethnic Russians have contributed amazing things to this country, including Jan Koum, who sold WhatsApp to Facebook for \$19 Billion and is the quintessential successful émigré'. He was born and raised in Ukraine and as one venture capitalist wrote, “When he arrived in the U.S. as a 16-year-old immigrant living on food stamps, he had the extra incentive of wanting to stay in touch with his family in Russia and the Ukraine. All of this was at the top of the mind for Jan when, after years of working together with his mentor Brian [Action] at Yahoo, he began to build WhatsApp.”

The founder of Google, Sergey Mikhaylovich Brin was born in Moscow in 1973 and moved to the U.S. to evade the persecution of Jews in Russia. Mikhail Baryshnikov is perhaps the greatest ballet dancer in the world, and Leningrad-born Gary Shteyngart has been recognized as one of the best writers of our time. Maria Sharapova is one of the best women tennis players who has ever lived, and actresses Milla Jovovich and Mila Kunis were born in Ukraine.

In New York City there are so many Russian-Americans who span so many walks of life, from Attorney Edward Mermelstein, to hospitality mogul Eugene Remm and others.

By virtue of my ex-wife, my kids speak Russian – and I am proud they do. Russian-Americans help make America great –

and discrimination should end against people of all ethnicities. Every single day negativities blare about Russia – and while there’s good reason to fear Russians including Vladimir Putin, that mustn’t apply to the many Russian American émigrés who make this country great.



About the Author: *Ronn Torossian is a Public Relations executive.*