Six U.S. senators and a congresswoman are in Moscow this week ahead of a summit between presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Finland later this month.

Russian media outlets have presented the visit as a coup for the Kremlin, which has shrugged off sanctions and allegations of electoral meddling.

On Tuesday, the U.S. lawmakers met with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and members of the State Duma and the Federation Council.

Russian media reported early Tuesday that the U.S. delegation, which is headed by Republican Senator Richard Shelby, had asked to keep the State Duma meeting closed for the press. (The U.S. Embassy did not respond to a request for comment.)

“The topics were Syria, Ukraine and Russia’s meddling in the U.S. election,” the head of the Duma’s financial markets committee Anatoly Aksakov told Interfax. “Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said the claims of election meddling were absurd.”

He added Volodin had said the accusations were “undignified” and “belittled” those who made them.

Lavrov said he hoped the visit would be a step toward “restoring relations,” Interfax reported.

The point was echoed by Shelby. Russia and the U.S. “can be adversaries, as in sport or business, but not enemies,” he was cited as saying by the state-run TASS news agency.

The lawmakers were also invited to visit Crimea, the head of the foreign affairs committee, Leonid Slutsky, was cited as saying by Interfax.

“In the future,” Slutsky said, “that which looks intangible and unlikely today could become a reality.”

The U.S. delegation is set to stay in Moscow for Independence Day on July 4.

The Russian-language internet has been flooded with a collection of football memes after the country’s dramatic victory against Spain in the World Cup on Sunday, both poking fun and lauding the historic game.

Social media users overwhelmingly chose three hot-dog-eating fans — who were filmed stoically munching on their buns in the 101st minute of the game at Moscow’s Luzhniki Stadium — as the heroes of the day.

The family wore kokoshniki, a traditional Russian headdress, to the game, and have already been immortalized with a graffiti mural in Moscow.

Much of the attention has centered on goalkeeper Igor Akinfeyev and striker Artyom Dzyuba, who since their performance in the Spain match have become the objects of nationwide adoration.

Akinfeyev’s foot, which made a crucial save in the penalty shootout, has been named the “Foot of God” by Russian Twitter users.

Photoshopped versions of his foot have been doing the rounds online: on a pedestal, reaching...
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One in 10 Russians Want to Emigrate — State Pollster

A recent survey conducted by the state-funded pollster VTsIOM shows that one out of 10 Russians want to leave the country. The pollster added it would be wrong to conclude that those emigrating were motivated by conditions in Russia. In its poll published on Monday, VTsIOM said that 10 percent of respondents expressed a desire to move away from Russia permanently.

Young Russians were especially keen to move: Among those aged 18 to 24, almost one-third (31 percent) of respondents said they wanted to leave the country.

For decades, Russia has suffered a brain and youth drain. According to federal statistics agency Rossstat, more than 300,000 people left the country in 2016. VTsIOM said that more than a quarter of those who thought of leaving had already begun preparing for the move by “collecting information about the destination country.” Twenty percent are learning a foreign language.

The top destinations were Germany (16 percent), the United States (7 percent) and Spain (6 percent), the pollster said.

Notably, one out of four of those questioned in the poll could name a relative or acquaintance who had moved away from Russia in recent years. The poll was conducted through phone interviews with 2,000 respondents on June 6-7.

The head of research at VTsIOM, Stepan Ilov, said it would be wrong to interpret the figures as a sign Russians wanted to “free the horrible Russian reality.”

“It is a testament to our youth’s openness to others’ countries, and could even be (interpreted as) a challenge to the outside world,” he was quoted as saying in an online analysis alongside the poll results.

“Don’t want anything to do with us? We will come to you ourselves — look at your people, and show who we are.”

A similar poll conducted recently by the independent Levada Center put the number of Russians considering emigration at 15 percent.

Muscovites were especially keen to move, the pollster found, with one out of five capital city residents thinking of packing their bags.

Why It Is Our Duty To Free Oyub Titiiev

I am looking at what has now become an iconic photograph of Oyub. The unsmiling face of a man looking up straight into the camera from behind the bars. Although the image is blissful, you can still see the dark circles behind his rimless glasses.

The most haunting part of this photo is Oyub’s facial expression — calm, exhausted and quietly powerful. Despite everything that has happened to him, including a fabricated arrest, the spectacle of a trial and uncertainty looming over his future, the human rights activist is still.

Oyub Titiiev was arrested on Jan. 9 after police in the Chechen republic planted marijuana in his car. This brazen framing tactic has become a notorious persecution device in the troubled region. It may not be as final as a gunshot to the head but, given the severity of the sentence, violent interrogations and the appalling state of prisons there, this is potentially life-threatening.

After he was detained, the activist was initially denied a lawyer’s visit, one of many procedural violations that have slowly become a pattern in his case. Oyub’s health has begun to deteriorate while in custody as he was denied a doctor’s visit for weeks. At present, the 60-year-old activist is facing a 10-year sentence.

After the murder of my mother Natalia Estemirova in 2009, which to this day has not been adequately investigated, Oyub volunteered to take over Memorial in Chechnya. To lead the human rights organization in those dark times seemed like a reckless and somewhat futile mission, but nevertheless, he had the courage and determination to do so.

Memorial is one of the oldest and most well respected human rights organizations in Russia. In the past years, its work has been endangered by Russia’s “foreign agent” law, which targets any organization that receives funding from abroad. Memorial’s status in Chechnya has further complicated by the region’s leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who perceives investigations of human rights abuses as a personal attack.

On multiple occasions, he has valorized his contempt for human rights activists in threatening, acrimonious language.

As voices of critics were silenced one by one, Oyub continued to do his job, collecting harrowing evidence of abuses and injustices committed by Chechen authorities. Suffice to say that Kadyrov was not pleased. In late December, the Chechen leader promised to “break the spines” of human rights activists, whom he perceived to be traitors and enemies of the state.

Oyub’s arrest, carried out by eager minions of Kadyrov, is a direct outcome of his indirect order.

Several weeks ago I collaborated with prominent human rights activists to record a video message urging people to sign the petition to release Oyub. The video addressed Russian President Vladimir Putin directly. He is the only one who can order Kadyrov to drop charges against Oyub, since the Chechen leader has great admiration and respect for his “commander in chief.”

In return, Kadyrov’s iron-fisted rule and close links with certain Middle Eastern states are proving to be a useful tool in Putin’s geopolitical game. During the World Cup, Kadyrov arranged for the Egyptian national team to train on Chechen grounds, a move that attracted international criticism.

As the players trained on Grozny fields, within 100 miles Chechen authorities continued to intimidate and illegally detain dozens of people. Oyub is but one of the many victims of Kadyrov’s regime and he is the one who can be saved. Activists, journalists, politicians and ordinary people from all over the world are coming together to demonstrate their support and urge the Russian government to take action.

Although I am not able to speak with Oyub, I know for a fact that he does not think of himself as a hero or a martyr — these qualifications are meaningless to him. Rather, Oyub can be described with by the authentic Chechen term komokh — a dignified, modest man whose main purpose is to selflessly serve the motherland and follow his honor code.

Against the setting of tyranny and lawlessness, he has undertaken the heavy burden of being an honest man in a violent place. He has helped many people, not asking anything for return. It is our duty to get him out of prison.

Lana Estemirova is a graduate in International Relations from the London School of Economics and is currently working on her first book.

Good Night, Platzkarts

Russian Railways will begin replacing platzkart cars with modern cars as early as next year, the Vedomosti business daily reported Tuesday, citing railway development plans for 2023.

In place of the older one-story carriages, new trains will reportedly feature cars with a shower cabin, baggage compartment and vending machines.

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Subterranean TV

The Moscow Metro was built to be a “palace for the people” – but at the time, the Soviet leadership probably wasn’t thinking of the World Cup. More than 350,000 people watched Russia’s match against Spain from the underground, the Interfax news agency reported, citing the metro press service.

The metro did not specify how they measured the number of eyeballs.

The Moscow Metro has been fitted with 8,720 screens on 1,896 trains which all show matches, the report added. The only line to have been left out of the football fun is the Light Blue Line and parts of the Big Ring Line.

Once the tournament is over, the screens will go back to showing information for passengers on schedule changes and construction work.

The giant Pacific octopus is very wise and tasty, would lose that match but he was unfortunately not around to see his prophecy come true. Abe added that another octopus would be used to predict future matches at Russia 2018.

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Possession Football
No Longer Path to Glory

When Spain won the World Cup in 2010 by guarding possession with near infinite zeal, a new maxim was etched into football’s textbook of received wisdom: Hug the ball and you win the match.

Other ways of playing that did not involve possessing teams to death were supposedly consigned to the dusky annals of football history, along with “lock and rush” and Herbert Chapman’s W-M formation, with possession football heralded as the peak of the sport’s technical and tactical evolution.

Yet if the World Cup has taught us anything, it is that possession is no longer the law in football. The three sides who have boised the ball the most in Russia – Spain, Germany and Argentina – have all said Do Svidaniya before the quarterfinals.

Spain averaged 69 percent of the ball in their four games, peaking with a 75-percent share in their last-16 clash with Russia, according to FIFA statistics.

It did not translate into goals or glory, however, as they were sent packing on penalties after laboring like an aging heavyweight, seemingly beleaguered that his once formidable jab was now little more than a minor irritation.

Germany arrived as world champions, but left after the group stage having racked up a 67-percent possession average in their three matches, which ended in two defeats and one desperate stoppage-time win over Sweden.

Perhaps it is too early to sound the death knell for possession football, which still has remarkably successful proponents.

Pepe Guardiola’s Manchester City side blitzen their way to the Premier League title, often giving opponents little more than a sniff of the ball.

Nonetheless, jealously guarding possession is no longer the cure-all it was once perceived to be. (Reuters)

Fan Zone CCTV Arrest

Moscow police have reportedly made their first arrest using facial recognition software at the Vostochny Gory World Cup Fan zone.

The capital’s “Safe City” surveillance system employs facial recognition capabilities, with around 160,000 closed-circuit cameras in public areas and the transport system.

The technology has already been used to arrest suspects in the month leading up to the start of the football tournament.

One suspect was arrested during the Russia-Spain knockout stage game on Sunday, a senior Moscow City Hall security official told the state-run TASS news agency on Tuesday.

Security cameras at the entrance to the fan zone identified “a citizen on the federal wanted list,” Vladimir Chernikov, the city’s head of regional security, was quoted as saying.

Almost 300 cameras with 50,000 photographs of criminal suspects, hooligans and blacklisted foreign fans uploaded into the system were installed at the fan zone and the nearby Luzhniki Stadium, Chernikov noted.

Russia is also holding a Brazilian robbery suspect, who was arrested on an international warrant at St. Petersburg’s stadium during Brazil’s game against Costa Rica two weeks ago.

A tough lesson for Spain: just having the ball doesn’t cut it.

Kadyrov Couldn’t Corrupt Mo Salah

It wasn’t supposed to turn out this way.

In August of last year, some 80,000 Egyptian football fans were celebrating their first World Cup qualification in two decades. Even though they arguably had been Africa’s greatest team, the World Cup had eluded them thanks to a mixture of bad luck, bad football, bad karma and, finally, a failed revolution.

But, in the Borg El Arab stadium outside Alexandria, Muhammad Salah stroked home a 94th minute penalty and Egypt marched on their way back to where they believed they belonged: among the world’s elite.

That penalty opened a remarkable season for Salah. He would score a record number of goals for Liverpool FC and play in the Champions League final, albeit briefly, after Sergio Ramos of Real Madrid and Spain jutted into him in the first half. It was touch and go whether Salah would even make the World Cup, a drama that triggered Egypt ahead of their first game.

The fact he would be able to play was the last good news Egypt received.

From then on, the squad was embroiled in a series of PR disasters. The enduring image from Egypt’s brief spell in Russia won’t be Salah’s two goals, or even his dedication by a jaded Egyptian public desperate for a hero. It will be the image of Salah hand-in-hand with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov at the Akhmat Arena in Grozny.

The Egyptian FA decided to base itself in Chechnya despite Kadyrov being a deeply controversial figure. Anointed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, he has ruled his republic with an iron fist and has been embroiled in numerous human rights scandals, the most recent being the alleged rounding up and torture of gay men.

Kadyrov is also a huge football fan who funds Chechnya’s Akhmat Grozny club. He often flies in former star players for matches which he himself plays in. Hosting Egypt and a global star was a publicity coup he wasn’t going to miss.

So, when the Egyptian side turned up for its first training session and Salah wasn’t there, Kadyrov simply drove to his hotel, woke him up and personally escorted him to the stadium.

A string of over-the-top set pieces followed. A 100-kilogram birthday cake for Salah in the colors of the Chechen and Egyptian flags. A grand banquet. The announcement that Salah would be granted honorary citizenship. And all with Salah grinning a forced smile.

As a result, Salah is reportedly thinking of quitting the national team. For Egyptians, there is no question who is to blame. “It begins with the EFA [Egyptian Football Association],” said Amer Khalifa, an Egyptian political analyst.

“That odious list further extends to the actors, dancers and VIPs who added to the circus atmosphere at the team’s training ground in Chechnya.”

As soon as news of Salah’s alleged international retirement surfaced – a story the EFA has denied – a hashtag went viral on Twitter: “I’m With Salah.”

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James Montague is a writer and journalist

Twitter: @JamesPiotr

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Igor Akinfeyev: The Saving Grace

A series of infamous blunders had left Russian fans with serious doubts about their keeper

BY EVAN GERSHKOVICH   @EVANGERSHKOVICH

Igor Akinfeyev dove to the right. The ball sailed down the middle. But as the Russian goalkeeper’s left leg swung out behind him, it blocked the penalty kick and knocked Spain out of the World Cup.

The victory on Sunday will arguably be the Russian national football team’s most famous ever. Going by FIFA’s rankings, it was a historical upset in the knockout rounds. Russia will now appear in the quarterfinal stage for the first time since 1970, when its squad was the best in the Soviet Union.

The undeniable man of the match was Akinfeyev. Because the team’s coach Stanislav Cherchesov had set up his team in a defensive posture – “they are better than us in many ways,” he explained before the game, “so I don’t believe we should risk going forward” – Akinfeyev was forced to make key saves after key saves. And that was before he stopped two of Spain’s penalty kicks following overtime.

After the match, Akinfeyev, the team’s captain, was quick to deflect attention. “I’m not the man of the match,” he told a scrum of journalists. “I don’t think I can say about him.”

He left his boyhood club, Spartak Moscow, for archrivals Zenit St. Petersburg in 2015, in a salary dispute he characterized as a lack of respect for his dedication to the club.

Having once been one of the most promising products of the Spartak academy, Dzyuba’s career at the team was plagued by loan spells and constant conflicts with head coaches.

Dzyuba has managed to quarrel with coaches and fans of every club he has ever played for.

After two successful seasons at Zenit, Dzyuba rose to become a star striker in the domestic league. However, one year before the start of the World Cup, his dream of performing for the national team was unexpectedly shattered.

After a reported altercation with head coach Stanislav Cherchesov in May 2017, rumor had it he stormed out from Russia’s training ground.

From there, it only got worse. Zenit’s new coach, Roberto Mancini, deemed the striker surplus to requirements. The club’s top goal scorer of the previous season was suddenly demoted to the bench, after managing only two goals in 24 appearances. By winter, the striker was demoted to Zenit’s reserve squad, which plays in Russia’s second-tier league.

Conflicts with the head coach and a goalless streak almost sidelined Russia’s star striker.

“Artyom is capable of rousing the whole team in the dressing room, he gives the players courage,” Guus Hiddink, Russia’s renowned former coach, said of the player in an interview to the Sport-Express newspaper. “He might not be the most technical or skilled player in the team, but it’s impossible to overlook his presence on the field.”

Russia’s fairytale progression into the quarterfinals, made possible by the striker’s decision to fight for a place on the team, has also seen his dour relationship with the head coach overhauled.

Dzyuba now runs up to Cherchesov after scoring and gives an army-style salute, already a gesture he is famous for.

“Cherchesov looks at him with a flurry of emotions. This is how a father welcomes his son after returning from the army,” Russia’s sports website wrote about the celebration.

“Several players told me: ‘Go up and take it!’ I was scared, to be honest. God forbid I miss. For so many years, the god of football had turned his back on us, but today, he was on our side,” Dzyuba told the Sovetsky Sport newspaper after the game. “We’ve put up with so much through the years, so much crap.”

At the beginning of the World Cup, Artyom Dzyuba’s career looked to be on a downward spiral.

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Igor Akinfeyev: The Saving Grace

A series of infamous blunders had left Russian fans with serious doubts about their keeper

BY DANIEL KOZIN   @DANIELKOZIN

Until the 41st minute, it looked as if Russia was in no way out of the World Cup. A goal down and outnumbered, the Russian players on Sunday could barely make it into the Spanish half, let alone carve out enough space for attempts on the goal. Then, after a breakdown in play by veteran defender Gerard Pique, the home side was awarded a penalty.

With 78,000 spectators on their feet and millions more glued to television screens, Russia’s lumbering striker, Artyom Dzyuba, coolly asked for the ball. First, he waited for the whistle. Then he slotted the ball into the back of the net.

It was a decisive moment — the realization of what later turned out to be Russia’s only attempt at a goal in the entire game, which ended in a penalty shootout and a historic Russian victory.

Even though he looked composed, Russia’s number 22 later admitted that he was terrified when he walked up to the ball.

“Several players told me: ‘Go up and take it!’ I was scared, to be honest. God forbid I miss. For so many years, the god of football had turned his back on us, but today, he was on our side,” Dzyuba told the Sovetsky Sport newspaper after the game. “We’ve put up with so much through the years, so much crap.”

Born in a working-class neighborhood in Moscow in 1988 to a Ukrainian father who was a policeman and a Russian mother who worked in a grocery store, he is notorious for being one of the most outspoken players in Russian football.

“Artyom is a remarkable footballer. He’s managed to quarrel with the coaches and fans of every club he’s played at,” the Komsomolskaya Pravda tabloid wrote. “Meanwhile, everyone who knows him personally only has the best things to say about him.”

More importantly, he is the player around which Russia’s remarkable team spirit is based.

“Cherchesov welcomes Dzyuba back to Russia’s team. It was later explained that he was undecided as to whether he was still the national team was unexpectedly shattered.

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Between his hands and into the net. The football magazine FourFourTwo lists the blunder as the fifth “most incredible howler” in World Cup history. Although Russia managed to salvage a draw, they lost the next match. Then, against Algeria in the final group stage game, Akinfeev committed another error — badly misjudging a cross and leaving his net wide open — sending his team home.

After yet another botched save knocked Russia out of the Confederations Cup last summer, calls to oust the goalkeeper grew louder.

“After that, people were talking about needing to replace him,” said Russian football journalist Igor Rabiner. “But it’s clear Russia doesn’t have a better goalkeeper. And the important thing about Igor is that, throughout his career, he has always been very good at bringing himself back up after making a mistake.”

Indeed, in Russia’s third match of the group stage this World Cup against Uruguay, Akinfeev was slow to react during two of Uruguay’s goals, eliciting post-match criticism.

In his career, Akinfeev has always been very good about bringing himself back after making a mistake. In the next match against Spain, his play was spotless. The goalkeeper, who has spent his entire career at CSKA Moscow where he started at five years old, had also long been the butt of jokes cracked by supporters of rival clubs, particularly Spartak Moscow and Zenit St. Petersburg.

Mostly they made fun of him, Rabiner said, for holding by far the longest streak of games without a shutout in the UEFA Champions League: 42 consecutive matches. The keeper in second place has just 16.

“He finally broke the streak in November and I think that gave him some extra confidence going into this tournament,” Rabiner said.

If domestic supporters had their doubts about Akinfeev heading into the World Cup, the goalkeeper’s love for his home never wavered.

Reportedly, Akinfeev refused multiple offers to move abroad to bigger clubs throughout his career because he likes “Russian nature, especially birch trees” too much.

“I believe in God and like to walk by Orthodox churches with their domes,” Akinfeev said. “Obviously, I can’t get enough of that in Europe.” The patriotic goalkeeper was also a surrogate for President Vladimir Putin during the president’s election campaign this year.

Yet that did not stop even Putin’s loudest critic, Alexei Navalny, from swooning over Akinfeev’s heroics following the win over Spain.

The opposition leader known for organizing street protests tweeted: “YESSSS! We need to announce a series of protests demanding the Hero of Russia honor — the country’s highest honorary title — for Akinfeev.”
Let’s Take This Outside

Even the goalkeeper doesn’t wear special gear in this courtyard near Aeroport Metro.

In this courtyard in Balashikha, a town near Moscow, the rules are strict: Show up late to the game, and you’ll have to watch from the sidelines.

In the winter, many courtyard football pitches are turned into ice rinks. But now, with temperatures nearing 30 degrees Celsius, the players are looking to stay cool.

Young students scrimmage in the schoolyard, taking in the midsummer sun, on a football pitch between Metro Typoply Stan and Konkovo.
Let’s Take This Outside

Far from the World Cup stadiums, young footballers are battling it out in the courtyards right outside their homes.

Photos by Pavel Zelenkov

A boy walks away from a game with his friends in a courtyard near Metro Dynamo, after a squabble over who can take the football home after the game.

A panel housing unit looms between Metro Tyoply Stan and Konkovo at the edges of the city, a vivid remnant of Soviet construction.

Despite the summer heat, these players between the Aeroport and Dynamo metro stations prefer to play the game in their blue jeans.

A group of boys abandon a football that’s been kicked around a few too many times.
A Guide to Some of St. Petersburg’s Most Beautiful Religious Buildings

The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood
The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood takes its name from the tragic episode of 1881 when Tsar Alexander II, who made history for abolishing serfdom in 1861, was assassinated by a terrorist on the spot where the church now stands. Inside the church you can see a fragment of the pavement stained by the blood of the Tsar. Liberated, as Russians call him, Alfred Parland designed the building in the style of 16th and 17th Russian churches. It is often called a museum of mosaics. There are more than 7,000 square meters of mosaics depicting biblical scenes. The cathedral was used as a mosque and a vegetable warehouse during the Soviet period.

The Lutheran Church of St. Peter and Paul
The Lutheran Church of St. Peter and Paul is one of the most important Protestant churches in Russia. Built in 1833-1836, it is one of the oldest and currently serves as the seat of the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia. With rounded arches, sweeping towers and classical-style statues of apostles Peter and Paul framing the front entrance, it is also late Empire style. The Soviets repurposed the church as an indoor swimming pool. In 1990 the church was restored and continues to hold services in both Russian and German.

St. Isaac’s Cathedral
St. Isaac’s Cathedral is known for its bird’s eye view of the city from the colonnade. There is no elevator, but the climb of nearly 300 steps is worth the effort. Designed by the French architect Auguste de Montferrande, the cathedral took 40 years to complete (1818-1858). As one anecdote has it, a fortune-teller told Montferrande that he would die after the cathedral was finished, so the architect made every effort to procrastinate. The truth is less dramatic. The cathedral is extremely heavy and required massive amounts of granite to stabilize it.

Holy Trinity Alexander Nevsky Monastery
The seminal Orthodox monastery in St. Petersburg is the Holy Trinity Alexander Nevsky Monastery, which is more commonly referred to locally as the kloster, a word for a large and important Orthodox monastery. It was founded by Peter the Great in 1710, making it nearly as old as the city itself. Popular legend has it that the monastery was established near the spot where Prince Alexander Nevsky won the historic Battle of the Neva against the Swedes in 1240. The monastery houses the relics of Alexander Nevsky. At the monastery’s Tikhvin Cemetery are the graves of Pyotr Dostoevsky, Pyotr Trikolovskiy and other famous Russian composers and writers.

St. Nicholas Naval Cathedral
The St. Nicholas (Nikolsky) Naval Cathedral, which locals call the “Sailors’ Cathedral,” is one of the oldest in town—a genuine masterpiece of baroque architecture. The fabulous blue and white Orthodox cathedral with shiny golden domes was built in 1753-1760 and designed by the Admiralty architect Savva Chevakinsky. It became a naval cathedral in 1762 by order of Catherine II. The cathedral’s walls are decorated with scenes from the history of the Russian Navy.

The Kazan Cathedral
The Kazan Cathedral, built in the early 19th century, makes clear visual references to St. Paul’s Cathedral in Rome, which was used as inspiration by the Russian architect Andrei Voronikhin. The colonnade symbolizes the open embrace of God. This Orthodox cathedral is home to the Our Lady of Kazan icon, one of the most revered icons in Russia. In 1909, following a petition from the Dalai Lama and with the permission of the tsar. During Soviet times the temple played several roles, including a home for a military radio station, a sports base and a zoology research lab. The temple resumed services in 1990.

Datsan Gunzechoinei Buddhist Temple
A visit to the Buddhist Temple, also known as Datsan Gunzechoinei, takes you on a detour from the city center, yet it has a remarkable history and makes for a memorable visit. It is the world’s northernmost Buddhist temple and was built in 1910-1915, following a 1909 petition from the Dalai Lama and with the permission of the tsar. During Soviet times the temple played several roles, including a home for a military radio station, a sports base and a zoology research lab.

Grand Choral Synagogue
The city’s Grand Choral Synagogue is the world’s third largest, after synagogues in New York and Budapest. One of the younger religious buildings in St. Petersburg, it was designed in Jewish Moorish style by Lev Balbman—the first Jewish graduate of the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts—and consecrated in 1895. It is open to non-religious visitors every day, except Saturdays and religious holidays.

Smolny Cathedral
The baroque Smolny Cathedral’s famous blue and white exteriors were designed in the 18th century by Italian architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli—the man behind the Winter Palace, the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoye Selo and the Grand Palace in Peterhof. It is part of the Smolny Convent that was established by the decree of Catherine the Great. The interiors did not survive, and the cathedral now serves as a classical music concert venue with a chamber choir.

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The Seven Worlds of Vladimir Vysotsky

By Andrei Muchnik | @amuchnik

Jewish Museum multimedia exhibit explores the life of the Soviet poet

Allways. Seven Worlds of ‘Vysotsky’ is a new exhibition at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center dedicated to the late singer and actor Vladimir Vysotsky, considered to be among the most brilliant poets of post-war Soviet Russia. The exhibition is the first in a series dedicated to the lives and art of prominent Jewish figures.

Vysotsky’s family on his father’s side came from the Brest region of contemporary Belarus. Allegedly, the poet’s family name is derived from the name of the settlement Vysokoye. Even though Vysotsky’s Jewish heritage has never been a significant theme in his poetry and songs, he acknowledges it in one of his poems: “A family of Jews, they dwell in Rome / Vysotsky, known nowhere else but their home.”

Vysotsky would have celebrated his 80th birthday this year. He died in 1980, just 42 years old. A singer-songwriter, poet and stage-and-screen actor, Vysotsky had an enormous and lasting effect on Soviet and Russian culture. A recent biopic ‘Vysotsky: Thank God I’m Alive’ (with a script by his son) provoked controversy because of the way it presented the artist — who is still idolized today — by largely focusing on his drug and alcohol problems.

Little is known about Vysotsky’s personal life despite his immense popularity in the Soviet Union. Since he often sang in the first person, his fans assumed his songs represented his own experiences. But they didn’t always. Contrary to his songs’ subjects, Vysotsky never took part in World War II, never served time in a prison camp and never even sailed a ship. His songs took place in worlds created by their author, but they felt so authentic that his listeners often mistook them for the real thing.

The idea behind ‘Hallways. Seven Worlds of Vysotsky’ was to show some of these worlds and explain their roots. The exhibition is literally a sequence of hallways, each symbolizing a certain theme in Vysotsky’s poetry. Visitors will be able to walk from one hallway to another and see replicas of a Moscow communal apartment, a World War II trench, a Moscow alleyway, a mental hospital and a typical Soviet pub. The experience is similar to immersive theater. All the items are authentic: furniture, cutlery and clothing — there’s even fresh food in the kitchen. You can touch most of the items and even open drawers in a cupboard.

‘Hallways’ tackles just one aspect of Vysotsky’s poetry. The exhibition only briefly mentions his work as an actor or his tumultuous personal life in the section devoted to the artist’s biography. The poems escort you along the way. Handwritten and typewritten drafts are displayed on the walls, while the headphones’ recording explains the visuals provided within the ‘hallways.”

In every hallway there’s background information explaining why this or that theme appeared in Vysotsky’s oeuvre. The communal apartment tells the story of the poet’s childhood, a dangerous alleyway refers to widespread crime in Moscow after World War II, and the psychiatric ward is Vysotsky’s reflection on the U.S.S.R. as a whole.

The exhibition is the brainchild of Yan Vizhnberg, the creative director of Loren Ipsum, the company that participated in the creation of multimedia installations for the Yeltsin Center in Yekaterinburg and Zaryadye Park in Moscow. To produce the exhibition, he gathered a film crew. Production designer Andrei Ponkratenko, who worked with Andrei Zvyagintsev on “Levanthari” and “Loveless,” served as the art director; while cinematographer Vladislav Opolensky, known for working with embattled director Kirill Serebrennikov on his last two movies, “The Student” and “Summer,” was the lighting designer.

After exhibiting at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, ‘Hallways. Seven Worlds of Vysotsky’ will tour Russia and other former Soviet countries. It runs through Sept. 23.

Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, 11 Ulitsa Obraztsova, Bldg. 1A. Metro Maryina Roschcha. jewish-museum.ru
Russian Americana

By Guy Archer

Despite the gloom, Moscow remains a strangely familiar place for Americans

Happy Independence Americans, the few of you left in Moscow. Try to remember that things weren’t always this bad – in fact, they used to be pretty good. And maybe they’re not as bad now as they seem, though they really are pretty bad on some levels.

But let us step back and take a look at things from a day-to-day perspective, discounting political and economic issues. The Russian affinity for American stuff continues unabated. Hamburgers have supplanted sushi as the de rigueur menu item at every restaurant – French, Georgian, Italian, whatever. American-style diners are still massively popular and all over the place. A younger generation of professionals is seduced by hipster clothes and replaced with something entirely more refined. I’ve seen what I thought was an unhealthy preoccupation with American culturebalance itself out, become more equal and appreciative of refinement. I’ve seen what I thought was an unhealthy preoccupation with American culture.

As Russia left its Wild West of the 1990s and Moscow saw the rise of a rapidly growing, more refined middle class, the taxman was shut down and replaced with something entirely more respectable – a place that now doubt sold sushi. Most of the dives that I loved disappeared. But the Starlite and the American Bar and Grill were still going strong and packed.

As Russian wealth grew, I noticed a new trend. To my delight, pick-up trucks began appearing in Moscow. Better still, many were jacked-up on huge wheels. Some were outrageously painted with all kinds of wild drawings. You would never find anything in such poor taste … except everywhere in America.

Over the decades, I’ve come to appreciate that the two countries genuinely share many attributes and predilections – and a wonderful lack of refinement. I’ve seen what I thought was an unhealthy preoccupation with American culture.

Despite the gloom, Moscow remains a strangely familiar place for Americans.

A long, strange trip

When I first arrived in Moscow in the late 1990s, the myth of America and many Russians’ fascination with America were at a fever pitch. Indeed, in my opinion at the time, things were even a bit overheated.

Per capita, there were very few restaurants in Moscow 20 years ago; and for the expat community, the social center of Moscow was the Starlite Diner at Mayakovskaya metro. Years earlier, a group of U.S. businessmen planted this authentic American diner smack in the middle of the Alvar-Abramov Garden, the first in a successful run of them. Go there any time, and you would run into people you knew. And just five minutes away was the notorious American Bar and Grill, a decidedly more seedy variation on the American theme; but just like the Starlite, it was always jam-packed with Russians digging the American theme.

At the same time, there was an American aspect to Moscow that was much more fascinating, accidental and authentic. There were genuinely rough bars all over town, and I adored them. In my mind, they were as wild and unpredictable as I imagined that the American honky-tonk bars had once been decades before. One place I enjoyed going was in the basement of the Central House of Artists, called Taxman. My first time there, some kid was playing perfect Jerry Lee Lewis – and I really meant perfect – while people around me were fighting and empty beer bottles were flying. I was in heaven. This was a place that wasn’t trying to be American, but was more of a genuine and altered glance into an older and cooler America of honky-tonks, attitude, fighting, great music and whatever happens next. It was in places like this that I began to appreciate one of the genuine connections between Russian and American cultures.

By Guy Archer was the communications director at the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia in 2007-2014.
Some Righteous Places for American Grub

Beverly Hills Diner
Travel through time and space as you enter Beverly Hills, a true 1950s American diner. Old movies play on the retro TVs, Sinatra and Elvis hits float from the jukebox and photos of classic Hollywood stars from Audrey Hepburn to Cary Grant line the walls. The menu is almost too long to read, with build-your-own-burgers, over a dozen milkshakes and five separate French toast combos, all just the tip of the iceberg.

SOS Cafe
Hang out for the foreign business community and tourists, skeptically entering the restaurant, that you’re actually in the U.S. And even Texan and simple modern interior give the impression that you’re right at home. In the same building, SOS Cafe offers a long-time rowdy evening will feel right at home at this restaurant.

Pyany Krab i Schastlivaya Kuritsa
This place is heaven and even the most dis- northeastern Texan would agree. A joint venture by innovative chefs Pyodor Tardatyan and Maxim Livsi along with Arkady Novikov, Moscow's best known restaurateur, Brisket BBQ brings the cooking culture of Texas into the heart of Russia's capital. Inspired by Tardatyan's visits to the Lone Star State, where he got a chance to discover all the secrets of the trade first-hand, the restaurant is a Texan style barbecue.

Chicago Grill & Bar
Chicago Grill & Bar aims to deliver the best, juiciest piece of meat you’ve ever had. The meat is prepared in a traditional smoker at low temperatures and takes several hours to cook, giving it that unmistakable smoky flavor. Offering an overwhelming array of dishes, from its namesake brisket – a cut of beef or veal from the breast or lower chest—to pulled pork or smoked quarter of duck, Brisket BBQ has something new for each visitor. Once you’ve come in from the bustling streets of Moscow and settled in a booth, the restaurant’s tiled walls and simple modern interior give the impression that you’re actually in the U.S. And even Texan tourists, skeptically entering the restaurant, ready to catch every mistake, end the meal with a glass of moonshine and feeling like they never left home.

Upside Down Cake Co.
If you’ve got a sweet tooth, there’s no better place than Upside Down Cake Co. to get your fill of American desserts. Cheesecake, red velvet, carrot cake, brownies—this charming café and bakery has it all, and plenty of other treats for good measure. The desserts are delicious, and the café's famous creations are a pleasure for the senses. If you get there hungry, there’s also a whole menu of standard American fare—just make sure to leave room for dessert.

Tin Woodman Bar
If breakfast is the most important meal of the day, then Tin Woodman is the place to be. Serving all day American breakfasts and burgers, the staff greets you like an old friend; the cocktails are creative; and the feta burger is to die for. Tin Woodman Bar is the perfect place to start your day, then Tin Woodman is the place to be.
Russia’s ‘Weld Queen’

By Dmitry Vasin  |  @dmitry_vasin

Bold determination, self-promotion and a welding torch

If you go to a modern art exhibition in Moscow or head to Nikolai Lenivez for the Maslenitsa festival, you might come across a young woman dressed in a traditional Russian fur coat, wearing a welding helmet that looks like a kokoshnik and with a yoke over her shoulders that holds buckets of iron armature. Alternatively, she might be in rough canvas overalls studded with metal diamonds. Either way, she’ll have her helmet on and her visor up.

This is Alexandra Ivleva, aka the “Weld Queen,” an artist and performer with a passion for welding and no concern for gender stereotypes. She calls her appearances “art interventions.”

You can see Ivleva’s massive sculptures at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, the Flacon Art Center, Khleborezov, Artplay, Zverev Center and other galleries around Moscow. The 32-year-old was born in Kislovodsk and moved to Moscow 10 years ago when her friends invited her to use their studio for oil painting. Ivleva says that one morning she woke up with the image of a giant silver bear in her head. She realized at once that she needed to give life to this image and started to weld it.

Ivleva needed determination to pursue her art, especially at first. She calls this process “art all-in,” meaning that there’s no time to wait for grants and fellowships. In the case of her work, there would never be enough to cover the expenses of the materials anyway.

On average, her sculptures cost 400,000 rubles (around $6,500). “That’s for rocking chairs. And that’s not expensive. But the average price of an art object in Russia is around 80,000-130,000 rubles ($1,200-2,000), and museum grants rarely exceed 50,000 ($800),” Ivleva told The Moscow Times.

To fund her work, she took out bank loans for the first 18 months of work. Production of her works is expensive, and the loan of 1.5 million rubles ($25,000) ran out in four months. But luckily, when the loan ran out, buyers came in.

“Be a sculptor in this country is to have no fear. There’s nothing bigger for me than making these objects. The fact that I believed in my ideas back then still drives me forward,” she said.

Critical acclaim

Some curators appreciate Ivleva’s performances. “She and her works bring joy to people of different ages,” Alja Khestanti, curator of an exhibition at the Nagornaya Gallery, told The Moscow Times. Ivleva’s works have also been on display in the gallery for the Moscow Bienalle for Young Artists.

Curator Irina Nikolskaya met the artist in her welding outfit at the opening of her eponymous exhibition at the Nagornaya Gallery, told The Moscow Times. Ivleva’s works have also been on display in the gallery for the Moscow Biennale for Young Artists.

A giant bear was Ivleva’s first major project. “To all at least a performance there in the traditional Russian style: a welding suit and an armature yoke. Maybe we’ll make a few costumes for other welding gigs to accompany me and present images of Russian beauty and power. As soon as I get a visa I’ll start confirming my project with the organizers. I want to exhibit my art abroad — it means an opportunity to carry out big and interesting projects,” she said.

Alexandra Ivleva’s works can be seen at two galleries: Nagornaya Gallery, 10 Ulitsa Remizova, Metro Nagornaya. gallery-nagornaya.com Nikolikaya Gallery, 55 Nizhnyaya Krasnoselskaya Ulitsa, Bldg 7, Office 107. Metro Krasnoselskaya, Baumanskaya.

nikolikayagallery.com
Les (Forest)

July 5

Les (Forest) is part of the program of the Performance Fest at the Meyerhold Center (TsIM). Up-and-coming theater director Dmitry Melkin and actors from Brusniki’s Workshop developed a site-specific performance about complex relationship between city dwellers and the forest and its inhabitants.

Meyerhold Center
23 Novoslobodskaya Uliitsa. Metro Mendeleevskaya.
meyerhold.ru

Theater Black Sea
July 5

Praktika, one of Moscow’s most experimen-
tal theaters, presents a production in which
hardly a word is spoken. “Black Sea,” directed
by the famous choreographer Oleg Glushkov,
is a performance by one actor, Yegor Koreshkov,
best known for his role in a recent television
hit program “The Optimists.” Combining video
art and plastic theater, it tells the story of a man’s
life from childhood to adulthood. Some of the
music for the production was composed by Pavel
Artemiev, a former member of the popular boy
band Korni, who now produces catchy indie-pop
tunes.

Praktika
30 Bolshoi Kozikhinsky Pereulok. Metro
Mayakovskaya.
praktikatheatre.ru

Exhibition Impressionism in the Avant-
Garde
Through September 19

The Museum of Russian Impressionism in
the Avant-Garde has launched another potential blockbuster ex-
hibition on the heels of “The Wives,” a highly
successful exhibition about the wives of the
greatest Russian painters of the 20th century.
The new exhibition’s title is a bit misleading: You
won’t actually see avant-garde works here, except
for reproductions. What you will find are early
paintings by such artists as Mikhail Larionov,
Kasimir Malevich, Natalia Goncharova, Aristarkh
Lentulov, Olga Rozanova and many others before
they developed a style that would later become
known as Russian avant-garde.

The Museum of Russian Impressionism
15 Leningradsky Prospekt, Bldg. 11. Metro
Belorusskaya.
rusimp.su

WHAT’S ON

LIFEHACK

What Are Those Weird Black Pills?

Ah, the little black pills. You might not know
what they are, but your parents or grandpar-
tents probably do. And you should know, too,
since they are essential part of every medical
cabinet.

These are activated charcoal tablets, sold for
a few rubles in strips of ten in every drugstore.
They are not the same thing as the charcoal you
light up and grill on at the dacha. This charcoal
has been cleaned and heated to make it more
adsorptive.

Yes, that’s right: adsorptive. That means that
when you gulp the pills down, they attract all
kinds of toxins, which become stuck (adsorbed)
on the many pores on the surface of the char-
coal. Then, the nasty stuff that has been making
you feel queasy sails happily out of your system
onboard the good ship charcoal.

This is what you grab when you are some-
thing you shouldn’t have, like dodgy street food
or market aspirin or acetaminophen. Swallow a handful
of pills — up to 100 grams — with water right
away. Although it does not soak up alcohol, it can
adsorb some of the impurities and toxins you
imbibe along with it, like some of the chemicals
in mixers. Take some before going to bed and
another batch in the morning.

It is also very effective for soothing an upset
stomach or taking care of the other embarrass-
ing sounds and smells that come from a night
of excess.

Another traditional use: as toothpaste. Yes,
scrubbing your teeth with black coal dust from
a few smashed pills actually cleans them bet-
ter than the white stuff in the tube. Dip a wet
toothbrush into the dust, scrub, rinse and re-
peat twice a week.

A great way to clean your mouth is by slathering
on the bite or sting, where it will pull
out some of the toxins.

To take it out to the dacha, too. If you get bit-
ten by mosquitoes or stung by a bee, smash a
tablet in a teaspoon of vegetable oil and
slather on the bite or sting, where it will pull
out some of the toxins.

The bottom line: Activated charcoal is the
best thing you never knew you needed.
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Next to the Bolshoi Theatre

Sale

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