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NEWSLETTER IV
By John Ritter

It is October 15th and I am halfway through teaching the American Legal System to Russian law students at Petrozavodsk State University. October is also half over and it marks a big weather change: no airplane flights go out of this northern city after October 15; it reminds me of March in the midwestern U.S. which comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb, except this is the opposite. It is 500 miles north of Moscow and has a climate and foliage like northern Ontario's. On October 1st it was sunny with temperatures in the 50's, leaves were yellow and gold on the silver birches, and so thick we could not see a Russian Orthodox Church inside a park. Now, 15 days later, the leaves are almost gone and the church's onion shaped steeples are the only gold to be seen in the park. Two days ago snowflakes fell for an hour and melted immediately. Global warming would be welcome here but is not yet noticeable. From my hotel room window we can see the still cars of a ferris wheel in a closed amusement park along the lakefront - this is a popular family vacation city during the short Russian summers. We have found restaurant menus with bear, deer, elk, pheasant and grouse on them and tried all.

Teaching at the University has been satisfying. There are fewer students in my class than I expected (10-15) but they are all interested, all speak good English, and I do not need a translator. One of the law students translated for me at my most interesting lecture so far - a presentation on U.S. Federalism to a conference on federalism at the University with 20 law professors from all over Russia. I was well received and presented with difficult questions afterward: why does the US insist on dividing Iraq into 3 separate nations when we insisted on keeping all of our states in one undivided nation even though civil war was necessary? What legal disputes between state and federal government have the states won recently? And, I heard from a Palestinian law professor from Israel that he thought the Russian model of federalism was better for Israel because it's fairer than America's. I do find it awkward to explain the strong American First Amendment separation between government and religion when our President and Congress present medals to the religious leader of Tibet (who also had some political or government involvement in the former Tibet).

I find no anti or pro American feeling in this northwest Russian city - everyone is occupied with his or her own interests, finances, and lives. Half of the music, movies, and television is American with Russian dubbed in (John Wayne and James Stewart sound funny speaking Russian in deep voices). Russians know America, its police chases, Miranda warnings, and values well.

I am surprised that nobody has asked me why the US wants to place missiles in Europe now that the Cold War is over, or why the Secretary of State invited "human rights leaders" in Moscow to the US Embassy. Because most human rights advocates are for Chechnyan rights and independence, this seems like the Russians coming to Washington and inviting Al Qaeda leaders to its embassy; how can the US expect help in its war on terrorism when it ignores Russia's worst terrorist threat? America also ignores the fact that Chechnya wants to secede from Russia and that when 15 Southern states tried to secede from the USA, we declared war on them, sent the army, marched through Georgia, and burned Atlanta.

My main impression of Russia is that Russians are much friendlier than I expected; also there is a general feeling that things are getting better economically and Russians are finally able to experience the material well-being of Europe and America.