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A Long-Time Russian Employee Looks Back

You are here: [Home](#) > [Publications & Resources](#) > [Frontline Archive](#) > [Frontline - Summer 1999](#) > **A Long-Time Russian Employee Looks Back**

By Natasha Savicheva

Moscow—It was the fall of 1991, soon after the coup. The crisis was hard upon us. Stores were empty and you had to stand in line for many hours waiting until a truck came and brought some food. It was a time of rapid destruction of all kinds of social rules, which had seemed as stable as the earth. Practically every day brought new shocks and sudden turns.

Feelings were mixed—we feared for our families and our children. But the main feeling that held our minds was a rapidly growing hope that a different future was becoming possible. The more the "usual procedures" disappeared, the stronger was the hope—the hope that a person could become an individual, be responsible for how to live his or her own life, how to think, what to read, and what to talk about.

I was happy to find my own way in that time, and I will always be grateful to IREX for it. I am not sure that even IREX realizes that its role and real effect is much wider than the program purposes indicated in our proposals.

Stan Zylowski came to my place with a friend of mine for a small party. It was so exciting to meet a real live American. To find that an "imperialist shark" has two legs, two hands, one head—just like us. Stan talked about strange things—international programs, scholarly exchanges, etc. He worked for something called IREX, an organization which he said ran educational programs and was going to start merit-based, open competitions for research opportunities in America. It was difficult to believe.

The laboratory of clinical psychology at the Cardiology



Moscow veterans Natasha Savicheva and Anna Danilina.

Anna Danilina Remembers

I started working at IREX in 1992 as an assistant to the Moscow director. There were only four people in our office on Gubkina Street and the feeling was that of a big family with strong traditions and a deep commitment to both our programs and our colleagues. To tell you the truth, traditions and contacts are the most important and distinguishing features of IREX. To my mind, people

Research Center, where I had worked for 10 years, soon lost its funding and was closed. I had to look for a job. Stan suggested that I come to work with IREX. There were two Moscow offices in those days. Stan ran the Unites States Information Agency's (USIA's) Educational Advising Center and I was the program coordinator for the Benjamin Franklin Fellowships, also sponsored by USIA. Liz McKeon was the head of the main office. My first day with IREX—I'll never forget it. Liz showed me my desk and computer. She asked me to open e-mail from Washington, DC, do whatever was requested, and then send back an answer. It is difficult to explain what that task meant to me. I had seen a computer before, even seen how people worked on them, but I had never tried it myself.

In those days, I often stayed in the office until 10:00 pm, until I was able to finish my task. The old modems and Moscow telephone lines meant that hours of dialing attempts were a regular practice. But within a week I was bravely using e-mail, and within a month my computer and I had become close friends. We even fell sick with viruses together. And my husband laughed at me when, waking up in the middle of the night, he would find me asleep among my computer books.

Everything was new for me in an American environment. Everything was different—different work, different people, a different kind of motivation and way of life. But one thing was common—we [American and Russian employees] all had a strong desire to find the way to each other, to understand. When this understanding came—first only on occasion, then more and more often—it brought the real joy of gaining something extremely interesting and important, of getting involved in a bright, diverse, and very strong culture. Sometimes I identify myself with my country: we both are discovering America—me within IREX and Russia joining the new world. And I am sure that for both of us this discovery is due, to a large extent, to IREX's people and programs.

who have worked with IREX for even a few weeks or a few months will always remember an atmosphere of family. I remember all of our colleagues from over the years with fondness and nostalgia. In 1992 I never thought we would have as many programs as we have today, programs such as Business for Russia and the Russian-US Young Leadership Fellows for Public Service program. Seven years ago I could not imagine that there would be so much growth within the IREX/Russia network or even in both our countries.

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