

Frédéric Xerri

**MY RUSSIA
NO LONGER
EXISTS...**



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Frédéric Xerri is 53 years old, a husband and father of 3 children and a senior executive in a large French group. He has been working for more than 20 years across all continents and is particularly familiar with Russia, having lived there for many years.

"My Russia no longer exists" is his first publication.

Preface

Reading Frédéric Xerri's work brings back many memories. For those who have been fortunate enough to live in Moscow, it's the pleasure of revisiting the winter atmosphere of Red Square, recalling the applause and cheers at the end of a Bolshoi performance. It's also remembering escaping the bite of stray dogs in the streets of Moscow or being saved from sudden falls of stalactites from snow-covered zinc roofs. Frédéric Xerri recounts all of this with emotion and candor. And when the day came for him and his family to bid farewell to Russia, after nearly 10 years there, he undoubtedly left with a bit of Slavic soul within him.

In light of recent events, one may wonder if it is politically correct to speak of Russia in nostalgic terms. For Frédéric Xerri, the question hardly arises, as he fully enjoyed living in this country, discovering its culture, traditions, and excesses. As an expatriate and observer of a country undergoing reconstruction in the 2000s for a decade, he did everything he could to be much more than the average expatriate. He learned the language, made Russian friends, and wanted to believe, like a large part of the population, in the "prodigal man." It must be said that at that time, Putin brought about a real anti-corruption revolution, was behind the rise of a popular class, and above all, instilled hope for a more stable and energized political and economic life. The road would be long, but the light was beginning to dawn for this country. As we now know, this was sadly only a beautiful utopia, as this same man is now capable of declaring war on a neighboring country, a brother country, so to speak. Let us hope, as the author reminds us, that Putin will not forget that the origin of his first name, 'Vladimir,' means "the one who governs peace."

Cécile Ribault-Caillol

*To my parents To my family
To my Russian and Ukrainian friends*

We wanted to do the best we could, but in the end we did what we always do
Victor Chernomyrdin

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Preamble

*In the kingdom of hope there is no winter.
Russian proverb.*

Am I capable of hating what I once loved deeply and sincerely?

Can I forget what has both spiced and shocked my life for almost twenty years?

Can or should we forgive our friends for everything?

Should we be ashamed to appreciate a country and its culture because its leaders have gone mad?

Should we deny ourselves?

These are the questions I have been asking myself since the morning of February 24, 2022, the day the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, launched the "special operation" in Ukraine.

The week before the events, I was in Moscow with my Russian friends, Vladimir and Dmitri, father and son, and Alexei. We drank vodka, like in the old days in front of the Kremlin, at the Beluga restaurant in front of a mountain of caviar.

A toast to friendship, a toast to children, a toast to France, to Russia, a toast to peace. We laughed at the Americans who were predicting war. But not just any war: a war with Ukraine! Like an absurdity from a B movie trailer. Like France attacking Belgium. How ridiculous! "Davai!"... A toast to Belgium!

And yet...a week later, we all had a hangover. A delayed hangover, but a hangover like we'd never had before.

It was during the February holidays. An early morning in the car with my wife and daughter to go skiing in Auron in the Southern French Alps.

I had hurried everyone around the day before. We had an early start. I didn't want to miss a single minute of skiing.

On the motorway, I turned on the radio. The announcement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine left me speechless. It stunned me.

"What an idiot," were my first words. "What a waste. He did it."

The feeling that I would never see my friends, or this wonderful country again came over me, and with it, a great sense of emptiness. Then I thought of my son, who was studying in Moscow and would surely have to be repatriated, and of my Ukrainian friends and colleagues, whom I called to check on.

The first words of Vyacheslav, the boss of our Ukrainian subsidiary, were to reassure me that our assets were safe. I had to insist that he tell me about his own wellbeing and that of our employees. In those early hours of the war, I don't think he fully understood what was happening either.

I implored him to be careful and look after himself. And we vowed to talk every day.

Next, I called the head of our Russian subsidiary to give him instructions, to protect our interests in the country and to check on him, his family, and our staff.

I made countless phone calls that day, serious discussions about business, livelihoods, and assets. However, there were some calls that I would have liked to have made but didn't. Or couldn't.

I didn't call any of my Russian friends. I was angry, and this emotion was clouding my judgement. Talking to them would have been sad and fruitless. Most of my friends were patriotic Russians, proud of their country and their culture, and hurt by the feeling of having been downgraded in the recent past. They were part of the Russian population that, with the arrival of Vladimir Putin in power, had seen their standard of living increase greatly. They had believed in the advent of the new Russia, had rejoiced in the annexation of Crimea, and I am sure would have found every justification for the outbreak of war. I didn't want to be disappointed by what they had to say. So, I didn't call them.

Having lived in the country for nearly ten years, I had also seen the transformations that the new regime had brought about. I had been seduced by the many positive changes that this young president had brought to his country. I had sometimes compared him to De Gaulle for his vision and for his stature as a statesman. Was it not he who had restored international respect to his country? He who had made Russia an economic power to be reckoned with in Europe? Or he who had modernized his country by equipping it with cutting-edge infrastructure?

I had the opportunity to meet him in 2019 during a conference of the main French companies present in the country. That day, he had been dazzling, seductive, and friendly. How could this man have committed this madness? A madness that would lead him and his people to ruin.

He would surely be remembered in history as a bandit, and his people, the people I loved so much, as accomplices in his madness.

We could discuss the reasons that led him to take such a decision. And for every tragic event, there are causes that must be analyzed objectively. Nazism in Germany was not born without a cause, and we Europeans bear our share of responsibility for its advent. We know this and learn it from our history books. Analyzing the causes is not justifying the unjustifiable, it is simply trying to understand.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, can we really dismiss the fact that the United States had been interfering in Ukrainian politics for years? Was this interference aimed at spreading democratic ideals, or at extending its influence by arming a neighbor of the Russian bear?

And should we Europeans have allowed these diplomatic wars of influence between superpower blocs to develop in our midst and to our detriment, or should we have acted in our own interests? In time, historians will no doubt find answers to these questions. But, for example, I couldn't easily imagine that the US would let a power like China arm Mexico without a word of protest. To understand is not to defend, and I repeat once again, what Putin decided to do on February 24, 2022, was madness, total lunacy.

The other phone call I would have liked to have made but could no longer do so, was to my father. He died on September 11, 2020, at the age of 85. I had introduced him to Russia during his visits, but also during our conversations, in which I told him about my experiences. Russia had also entered his life, and my mother's life. The caviar, blinis, and vodka that we now enjoyed as a family every Christmas were some of the ways that the country soaked into our family's culture.

My father was above all a friend. The kind of uncompromising friend with whom you could have heated discussions, even arguments, but who you would meet again a few hours later for a drink as if nothing had happened.