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Q&A: Ice Cream and Socialism Inspire French Russophile

By Alexander Bratersky

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Matchabelli is concerned about Russians' lack of faith in their country. **Vladimir Filonov**

As Wladimir Matchabelli walked through barricades and shouted anti-government slogans, he never dreamed that he would witness events in Moscow that were comparable to those he was participating in that day in May 1968 in Paris.

But he also didn't imagine that he would wind up as the head of a Moscow-region-based company making waffle cones for leading Russian and Western ice cream producers.

Matchabelli, 64, was born in Lyon, France, into a family of Georgian émigrés. His great uncle Nikolay Chkeidze had been a leading member of the Russian Social-Democratic party and later a senior leader of the independent Democratic Republic of Georgia before it was invaded by Bolshevik forces in 1921.

Wladimir Matchabelli

Education

1973 — Institute for political science in Lyon, France 1974 — Lyon 2 University, department of Russian studies

Work Experience

1974-1982 — Assistant at the France-USSR Society
1982-1991 — Deputy head of the France-USSR Society
1991-1993 — Advisor on Russia to the president of the international affairs committee of the French National Assembly
1991-1995 — General director of the Pushkin Center in Paris
1995-1999 — Director of the Franco-Russian program of international management at the All-Russian Academy of Foreign Trade
2005-present — General director of ice cream cone manufacturer Ruskon, Zhukovsky, Moscow Region

Civic Activity: Since 1994, head of the French Association of Friends of Russia
Favorite author: Plato
Weekend getaway destination: southwest France

Another great uncle was known as Prince Gorgeous Matchabelli. An amateur chemist, he fled from Russia to New York after the revolution and created several perfume brands, founding the famous Prince Matchabelli perfume line.

Matchabelli, who unlike his noble predecessors prefers to travel in Moscow on the metro, said that his imperial roots are what caused him to become interested in both Russia and Georgia. "My grandparents told me a bit about Georgia, but they died early and I wanted to know more about this time," he told The Moscow Times in an interview.

While studying at the philology department of a Lyon university in 1972, he made his first visit to the Soviet Union as an exchange student. Speaking in colloquial Russian, Matchabelli feels a bit nostalgic about those times as he remembers Muscovites eating ice cream even during the freezing winter, equating it to the only thing resembling fast food at the time.

Matchabelli later used his knowledge of the country to facilitate Soviet-French business contacts while France occupied a prime position in terms of the Soviet Union's relations with Western countries in the 1980s and 1990s.

It was Matchabelli who in 1993 helped start one of the first media ventures with a European investor, Radio Nostalgie, which broadcast tunes by such crooners as Edith Piaf, Elton John and Frank Sinatra.

In addition to serving as the head of ice cream cone maker Ruskon, which is based in the Moscow region town of Zhukovsky and employs 32 people, Matchabelli serves as Moscow's representative of the French Socialist Party, which he became a member of in 1974.

Matchabelli, who appears at international conferences organized by the left-leaning A Just Russia party, believes that democratic socialism is possible in Russia, but before any path can be chosen, locals have to learn to respect their own country.

"Before I started to do business here I was more of an optimist," he said. "But I see that Russians lack faith in their country."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: As a student who participated in the anti-government protests against the rule of Charles de Gaulle in May 1968 in France, do you see parallels with the current political situation in Russia?

A: There are some. There is a new generation of young politicians such as Alexei Navalny and Ilya Ponomaryov who want changes. There are slogans on Bolotnaya about fair elections, but most importantly, it is about the opportunity to live differently. I was 20 years old in 1968, and France was in a situation when it had great opportunities for development, but we young people were not given a chance to take responsibility for our future. The May 1968 protests were a spontaneous outburst because we understood it was possible to live differently.

But in Russia, despite the increasing hopefulness, young people still lack a foundation. Some people I meet here call themselves social democrats, thinking that is enough to create the appearance of being one.

Q: How did you get involved in the production of ice cream cones in Russia?

A: It happened by chance. A group of French businessmen approached me saying they were interested in opening a business to produce ice cream cones, and they asked me to find ways to do this in Russia. There is a company in France called France Cones, which makes those cones, and their main client is Nestle, which has its own ice cream production in Russia.

Nestle was buying these cones from the French company, which also had a factory in Germany. The cones were purchased and transported to Russia. But they realized that instead of moving large trucks through customs, it would be cheaper and more convenient to just start a manufacturing business in Russia.

I first started working in this business as an adviser and eventually took over as general manager.

Q: What kind of challenges did you face when this business began here?

A: Of course I faced difficulties while starting up this plant. But I wanted to prove that it was

possible to open a small company here. There are French giants such as Danone or Bonduel that exist in Russia, but no small French businesses. Today, we are one of the top three cone makers in the country, and our clients are leading producers of ice cream such as Nestle and Russian ice cream makers Iceberry and Russky Kholod.

Q: What sort of adventures did you have with bureaucracy here?

A: Engaging in business in Russia is similar to running a marathon. You are alone and no one will help you, and you can rely only on yourself. I had no idea how hard it would be until I was confronted with the bureaucratic structures involved in giving permission to open a business. If I was opening a business in France, I would have gone to the mayor of the city, and he would have told me how he could help. Here, people look at you and probably think that you might have a lot of money, and they think about how they can get some of it.

Q: What other challenges have you faced while starting a business?

A: I found that there are no structures in Russia or in Europe to help small international businesses such as ours. We needed only 3 [million] or 4 million euros, and when we approached banks in the West they looked at us and said, "If you were building a plant for 30 [million] to 40 million euros, then we'd give you the loan."

Russia is a huge country, and it is difficult to draw attention to small business. Conditions for opening a small company are the same as for opening a huge plant. In order to open a business, you need dozens of permits. I am just glad that I managed to get permission for a gas connection in the course of a year, although it can take even longer. In Russia, you have to buy gas in advance for a year, and you must guess how much gas you will take from Gazprom. But do you think I even know what my business situation will look like a year from now?

Q: Did French businessmen have an easier time doing business in the Soviet period than businessmen from other countries?

A: During the Soviet era, more people knew French than now. Learning French was quite common, especially among women, and when Russians were studying a foreign language they paid more attention to French. French businessmen were more welcome because the Americans were the chief enemy of the Soviet Union, and the Franco-

Soviet Chamber of Commerce was a serious lobbying group that was involved in major joint projects in various areas, including nuclear power.

Q: What were you involved in before you started with the ice cream cone business?

A: My main expertise was Russian language studies and the relationship with the Soviet Union. In 1993, I participated in setting up the Franco-Russian Radio Nostalgie. Then, I worked on various Russian-French commercial exhibitions and later became involved in setting up an MBA program for Russian managers with the Paris Chamber of Commerce. We sent students to study economy, law and business at many different French universities. Many of those who went through our program later went on to work for large companies such as Societe Generale, as well as other French and European companies operating in Russia.

But France does not occupy the same position it did 20 years ago. The new generation that is

now ruling Russia studied English and went to business school in London.

Q: Did your Russian roots and membership in the French Socialist Party help you deal with the Soviet Union?

A: In contrast to the Communists, the Socialist Party never had a tradition of cooperation with the Soviet Union. French Socialists believed that the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state that betrayed the cause of socialism and its relationship with human rights and helping dissidents.

But the right-wing Gaullists viewed the alliance between the Soviet Union and France in terms of the old idea of de Gaulle, "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals," and so they were determined to cooperate more.

As far as my Russian roots are concerned, I found that people looked at me differently. Some were suspicious: "What kind of person is he, coming from such a family and still interested in Russia?"

I think that special services collected a good deal of information on me. But some people thought it was good that a new generation of families that emigrated were still interested in Russia.

Q: Do you feel like you belong here?

A: I would say that I have a dual culture, and I like to speak the Russian language. It is hard to be without Russia. You can blame it and disagree with it on the one hand, but at the same time, I have not seen anyone who worked here who could leave without feeling nostalgia. I still remember how we walked around here at night to visit friends and people would give their house keys to strangers if they needed a place to spend the night. Of course, life is different now. It has become more consumer-oriented here.

Q: What is your strategy for managing people and doing business in Russia?

A: You must trust people. I'm the CEO and I am responsible, and I decide what decisions the company should make. But I have company meetings every week, and we discuss all types of issues, from accounting to manufacturing. We are a small company, and everyone gives their opinion and then the majority decides, or I decide while taking all opinions into account. The market economy does not exclude respect for people.

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