

Q&A: Romanoff Descendant Getting to Know Russia

By [Anatoly Medetsky](#)

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Romanoff, right, inspecting the Komsomolsky Mine. His work with Norilsk Nickel helps him understand Russia.

Grand Duke George Romanoff is likely the first member of the Romanov dynasty of Russian monarchs to work at a major Russian company.

Living in Madrid, the grand duke started out in 2008 at Norilsk Nickel, the mining giant co-owned by two Russian billionaires, as an aide for European Union matters. He landed the job at the invitation of the company's former chief executive Vladimir Strzhalkovsky.

After a couple of promotions, Romanoff, a disputed heir to the helm of the Russian Imperial House, is now chief of the company's key trading hub, Metal Trade Overseas, whose head office is in Switzerland.

"I am truly grateful for this experience, my first experience on the commercial side of the

business," Romanoff, 32, said in an interview. "This position has given me valuable insights into the metals industry and into the ways of current-day Russian corporate governance."

George Romanoff

Education

Runnymede College in Madrid✕

D'Overbroecks College, Oxford✕

St Benet's Hall, Oxford

Work experience

2012–November 2013 — chief executive of Metal Trade Overseas, the main sales hub for Norilsk Nickel; Zug, Switzerland.

2008–2012 — president of Norilsk Nickel Europe; London and Brussels. Aide to the director general of Norilsk Nickel.

2001–2008 — assistant to Loyola de Palacio, former European Commissioner for Transport and Energy; Brussels. An entry-level job at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Atomic Energy and Security; Luxembourg.

The Romanov dynasty, which marked its 400th anniversary earlier this year, has no claims on property or power in Russia, but Grand Duke George and his mother, Grand Duchess Maria, the current though disputed head of the imperial house, have often said they were happy to re-engage in the life of Russia and the rest of the former empire after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The family celebrated the anniversary in the Crimea, a region in Ukraine, whose parliament had ordered support for the event. During the visit from Sept. 19 to 22, Romanov family members and their guests — including heads of the royal houses of Egypt, Portugal and Albania — heard the national anthem of the Russian Empire, God Save the Tsar, and attended a party at the Livadia Palace, the favorite of Russia's last emperor, Nicholas II. Guests arrived at the palace in white limousines and took a red carpet to enter the building.

"It is the first time since the revolution in 1917, and perhaps the first time ever, that such a great number of representatives of royal houses gathered at the Livadia Palace," said a statement from the Grand Duchess Maria's office. Nicholas II abdicated the throne during

the Bolshevik power grab in 1917.

During the celebration of the anniversary, Their Imperial Highnesses Maria and George also met Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich at his Crimean residence in Simferopol, on the Black Sea.

The royal mother and son also traveled to the town of Novy Svit, where they revived the tradition of imperial patronage of the local winery, which was founded by Prince Lev Golitsyn in the 19th century.

This interview with Grand Duke George took place by e-mail and has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How many times have you been to Russia this year and last year, and why do you come?

A: I make frequent business trips to Russia, but I try not to attract attention to myself during them. The public is usually much more aware of my official travels to Russia in my capacity as the heir to the Head of the Russian Imperial House. Besides business and my official duties, there are other important occasions that bring me to Russia, but we do not consider it necessary always to advertise this. These trips are part of my normal daily life and work. It would be unwise, wearisome, and probably very counterproductive for me, were I to make these trips into public-relations events.

Q: Where in Russia have you traveled during the past year or two?

A: I have been to Moscow and St. Petersburg more than anywhere else. But in addition to visiting the capitals, I have traveled across much of Russia. I have been to all the ancient Russian cities along the Volga, in the Urals, Siberia, and the Russian North. I have also been to many countries that were once part of the Russian Empire — Ukraine, Georgia, and Transdnestr.

Q: Do you have a place of your own to stay at when you are in Russia, or do you stay in hotels?

A: We do not have a permanent place of residence in Russia. We stay in hotels or in the residences provided to us by our hosts.

Q: Have you been to the Winter Palace? If so, what feelings did you have about being at the former official residence of Russian monarchs, which now houses the Hermitage Museum?

A: I am truly very glad that this national treasure has been preserved. Of course, I feel very excited to be in that place where my ancestors lived and served. When you walk through its halls you can sense the unique history of that building, as one might feel in any great historic royal palace.

If I could go back in time I would want to see what a normal day in the palace was like and see it bustle with life from all the people living and working in it. I am glad that the Russian government keeps this and other Imperial palaces in such good repair and that every year millions of my countrymen and tourists from all over the world have the chance to come and see the beauty of our country and national heritage.

Q: How would you describe your experience working for Norilsk Nickel?

A: I have to begin by saying a word of thanks to the company's former chief executive Mr. Strzhalkovsky for giving me the opportunity to work for a Russian company like Norilsk Nickel. Mr. Strzhalkovsky first brought me in to be his adviser on issues related to the EU, and I benefited enormously from his strong model of business leadership. Shortly after taking on this position, I assumed the responsibilities of president of Norilsk Nickel Europe in London and Brussels, representing the company's interests before various agencies of the EU. I then was named a member of the board of directors of an association of companies in the nickel industry, where I was positioned to help enhance and solidify the reputation of Norilsk Nickel and other similar companies from across the globe within the EU.

For the past year, however, I have been working as CEO of Metal Trade Overseas, the main sales hub for Norilsk Nickel. I am truly grateful for this experience, my first on the commercial side of the business. This position has given me valuable insights into the metals industry and into the ways of modern Russian corporate governance.

All this experience is giving me a greater understanding of Russian business and its enormously significant role in today's global economy.

Q: Do you have any other positions in addition to your role at Norilsk Nickel mining company?

A: I am pursuing a variety of initiatives, some commercial and some charitable. With my 12 years of knowledge and experience working in European institutions, and collaborating with some like-minded individuals, I am working on creating a public affairs and communications platform in Brussels, called Romanoff & Partners, which will specialize on advancing the corporate and public interests of businesses throughout the EU, not only those in Russia or Eastern Europe, bridging my life experiences in my adopted country with those in my true homeland, Russia — much in the way that Peter the Great bridged the gap between East and West in his own time.

I am also heavily involved in charitable endeavors, building on and continuing the historical traditions of philanthropy of my forefathers, by creating The Russian Imperial Foundation for Cancer Research. This foundation will support our fight against what is now one of the greatest health threats worldwide and a major cause of death in Russia today. We are now in the process of gathering medical experts from around the world to help us find the best ways to focus our energy and resources. I am also hoping to provide an opportunity to our Russian medical experts and medical students to play a vital and prominent role in the work supported by the foundation. With a little luck and God's help, I believe that we can make a real and substantial contribution to a much larger, even global, effort to put in check this great evil of our time.

Q: What advice would you offer to foreigners who would like to invest in Russia?

A: I would emphasize to them that Russia offers a very stable and secure investment environment. I would urge foreigners to see the real and potential benefits that lie not only in Russia's vast quantities of natural resources, but in establishing long-standing economic partnerships for the future.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

A: My faith in God is a source of inspiration for me on a daily basis, and I draw inspiration from my strengthening and expanding ties with my homeland.

I would have to mention Ana de Palacio, a prominent Spanish lawyer and former president of the Judicial Committee of the European Parliament, and the late Loyola de Palacio, the former vice president of the European Commission, who gave me the opportunity to come and work in the institutions of the EU and to broaden my horizons on the issues affecting Europe and the world.

My grandfather, Grand Duke Vladimir, had an enormous influence on my development and education. He was interested in technology, history, economics, theology, and literature; and he traveled a great deal during his lifetime. My grandfather was always able to find a common language with anyone he met: with heads of states and with waiters and janitors, with the elderly and with children, with those on the political right and those on the left. He treated everyone he met with respect. He died when I was only 11 years old, but that was old enough for me to understand and remember many of the things he said and did.

I would have to add that Patriarchs Alexy and Kirill have both made an enormous impression upon me. I discovered two great men: two great minds and two towering spiritual leaders, and both possessed a great sense of humility. Both Patriarch Alexy II and Kirill I have treated my mother and me with great kindness, have helped the Imperial House to be at home again in our homeland, and have supported us through their prayers and their good advice.

Q: What challenges have you faced in your life? How did you overcome them and what lessons have you learned from them?

A: In a globalized world, the increased speed of modern communications has boosted the amount of work one can do. In the big turmoil that our professional lives have become, sometimes you could lose precision. I have learned to do what needs to be done without losing sight of the deeper meaning of the matter at hand.

Q: What piece of advice has had the largest impact on your life?

A: Always set the trail, never follow the path. And: Whatever you do, do it with respect.

Q: Why do you like to visit the units of the Russian armed forces, and what units have you visited?

A: Love for the armed forces is something that is in our blood. Many generations of my ancestors served in the military. This long tradition of military service was broken with the exile of my family from Russia, but I very much hope this will be only a temporary break in that tradition. I have had the opportunity during most of my travels through Russia to visit military units stationed in those regions I happened to be in.

Q: Is there some skill or ability that you do not know how to do, but would like to learn?

A: I like learning new things, especially about machinery and electronics. For example, I am an avid diver and I recently got my boat license, which was on the list of things I want to learn

how to do. I would also love to learn how to fly a helicopter.

Sometimes I get passionate about something that I never thought or expected I would ever care about. To take just one example, I have discovered in the course of my work on the Cancer Foundation that I am intrigued by the ins-and-outs of medical research. I have found that the best new knowledge one can acquire is that which can be put to the service of others.

Update: Romanoff left the employ of Norilsk Nickel in December, after giving this interview.

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9