

SKIP NOVAK

CURRENT EVENTS LEAD TO REFLECTIONS ON
SOVIET RUSSIA'S FAMOUS *FAZISI* PROJECT

Given the current conflict in the Ukraine it seems an appropriate time to retell a few anecdotes of my experience skippering *Fazisi* in the 1989/90 Whitbread Race.

When people bring up the story in conversation they more often than not will ask something like, 'How was it with the Russians...?'

Lest we forget, the project started out pre-Perestroika and was truly a Soviet affair both in organisation and in the composition of the crew. In the team we had Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, a Moldavian and a Latvian. The chairman of the project was Georgian, the designer was Russian, the skipper elect was Ukrainian. When I joined the team in Poti in Georgia where the hull was built, the mood was collegiate and Soviet.

The Soviet Union was at that point still cohesive but on the edge of disintegration. The project had no financial backing from the State, but neither did the State stand in the way of raising sponsorship money in hopes of competing in an international event without Soviet 'supervision' (in other words, no commissar along for the ride). Perhaps the Soviet system was by then tired of control freakery, or some footlights were beginning to show through the 'iron curtain' before the first act of glasnost.

Everyone in the team knew the deal. Whatever differences of opinion there were on nationality issues, they had to get along for everyone's benefit, but it was clear the common tongue was Russian. Passports were finally issued to the crew as we waited at Sheremetyevo Airport with *Fazisi* in the belly of the Antonov 124, scheduled to fly to London. This was the crew's ticket out of the Soviet system, probably for good, and they knew it.

During our eight months of getting *Fazisi* around the world, with all its dramas including the suicide of the Ukrainian co-skipper after Leg 1 in Uruguay and the ever present threat of having to throw in the towel due to lack of campaign funds, I could honestly say that national politics and identities were never that much of an issue.

Arguments on deck were a feature,

some light-hearted, others not so, and seldom were they explained to this non-Russian speaker. Only one incidence of physical violence occurred: a Georgian knocked the Moldavian to the bottom of the cockpit, but that turned out to be over a woman in the last port. However, when one Russian crewmember expressed to me, in confidence, what he thought of the Georgians in the crew (not a phrase that can be repeated here) it shook me, realising that racism was boiling under the surface.

Almost everywhere we went the media pronounced that 'The Russians are coming!', leaving the non-Russians in the crew somewhat left out of the party. But in fairness, by the time we were halfway around, the Soviet Union did not exist. So how else to describe this crew other than Russian?

We had three communist party members when we started, and they had no party to return to.

With some changes along the way, the core of the crew finished the race and with a few

exceptions most did not return to their homes, leaving their wives and families for good. A tough decision, but in their eyes an obvious one. Even more tragic was that two more crew, one a Russian, another a Georgian, took their own lives within a few years of the finish.

The Russian *Fazisi* crew that went global – and without exception became successful – probably would not be recognised as Russians today. I hope they are never obliged to explain or defend themselves for being Russian.

Fast forward to 2014 when I visited my agent in Moscow, shortly after Russia invaded and took back the Crimea. My previous experience of this great city had been as its empty shell in 1989 and it was unrecognisable in its western-style renovation. While there I was hosted in a former client's dacha outside Moscow and one evening invited to a dinner with her friends in the city – all young professionals living what appeared to be a very pro-western, affluent lifestyle.

During the dinner I put my foot in it big time by commenting on the dreadful state of affairs in Crimea – and was left in no uncertain terms where they stood, firmly behind the invasion and firmly behind Putin. Today it all sounds rather too familiar. ■

'Fazisi was a ticket out of Soviet Russia, for good'

