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Eva Rossmann's Mystery Novel «Russen kommen» The Russians Are Coming: New Crimes, Old Fears, and Intercultural Alliances

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Abstract

Eva Rossmann's mystery novel *Russen kommen*, the tenth in a popular series, takes up a hot topic in Austria's tourism industry: the tensions surrounding the recent influx of newly rich Russian visitors. This article uses Rossmann's mystery as a case study to examine the impact of global culture and transnational investments on Austrian society. Trapped between provincialism and globalization, Austrians are forced to revisit old fears and find new ways of dealing with contemporary challenges. Due to its wide appeal, popular culture can lead the way in these negotiations.

In 2008, 240,000 Russians visited Austria, accounting for 1.1 million overnight stays, mainly in Vienna and Tirol. They came to ski and shop, and they spent on average more than double the amount German tourists spent. While the Austria Tourism Marketing Agency actively courted these newly rich Russian visitors, many locals complained about their supposedly bad manners and also their large-scale investments. In 2007, after seeing property prices increase 50% over a two-year period, the town of Kitzbühel even went so far as to debate a quota for Russian tourists (Harms). Ironically, the proposed quota of 10% was higher than the total estimated number of Russian visitors the town hosted that year. Only in January, the time of the Russian-Orthodox Christmas, Russian guests account for approximately 10% of visitors in Kitzbühel («Immer mehr Russen»).

Eva Rossmann's mystery novel *Russen kommen*, the tenth in her popular Mira Valensky series, takes up this hot topic in Austria's tourism industry. Her 2008 novel starts with four rich Russians fleeing through the kitchen of a skiing lodge after drinking some very expensive wine. It then moves

through old hostilities from World War II, violent «greetings» from the Russian mafia, and current international entanglements to the discovery of corruption and abuse of power, both abroad and at home. Who is responsible for the killing of a Russian oligarch? Are the murderers Russian businessmen without scruples, or staid and upright Austrians who have been driven to financial ruin?

In real life as well as in Rossmann's novel, the relationship between Austrian hosts and Russian visitors is complicated and fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, Austria's economy relies on tourism and the money spent by foreign visitors. Austria is actively trying to position itself as a global player in an increasingly interconnected world. On the other hand, Austria's rather parochial and conservative population is grappling with the changes of globalization. Rich Russians in particular, who not too long ago, as Soviet citizens, were the subject of contempt or sympathy, now cause jealousy and resentment. Newly rich Russians flaunt their wealth by showing off expensive consumer goods like Rolexes and high-priced designer clothes (Wetz). They dine on caviar, drink champagne, drive fancy cars, and party excessively. Katrin Sachse describes the Russian tourists in her 2006 *Focus Magazin* article «Laut, trinkfest und reich» as follows: «Russen verlangen das Beste und Teuerste: Sie buchen Suiten, begehren Kaviar, Trüffel und Champagner». She then quotes a salesperson who complains about the Russians' behavior in her fashion boutique: «Die benehmen sich grauenvoll, aber kaufen wie die Wahnsinnigen». This observation is backed up by economic data: A Russian visitor spends on average 250 Euro a day, more than double the 114 Euro the average German spends («Reiche Russen,» *Welt Online* 2007)¹.

One just needs to read the headlines of recent newspaper articles to glimpse this contradictory and largely negative image of Russians. «Gefürchtete Rubel-Millionäre» (*Der Spiegel* 2007), «Der Rubel rollt» (*Die Welt* 2007 and *News.at* 2011), «Laut, trinkfest und reich» (*Focus* 2006) and «Immer mehr Russen sind im Anmarsch» (*News.at* 2007) succinctly synthesizes the economic promise and social fear caused by this newest Russian «invasion»². Andreas Wetz, in an article in *Die Presse* from February 2008

¹ This trend has been holding steady, despite recent gains by Asian shoppers, Russians still are the biggest spenders in Austria («Der Rubel rollt in Österreich», *News.at* 2011).

² The use of sensationalist headlines is not restricted to on-line news services or one end of the political spectrum; I have looked at articles in *Die Presse*, *Der Standard*, *Die Welt*, *Focus* and *Der Spiegel* as well as *News.at*.

(«Wien, ein Refugium für reiche Russen»), summarizes the stereotypes as follows: «Sie sind laut, sie sind vulgär und zeigen das, was sie haben, gerne auch in der Öffentlichkeit. Das Bild, das in Österreich von russischen Staatsbürgern gezeichnet wird, ist kein schmeichelhaftes». Milena Borovska echoes these sentiments in a 2010 article in *Die Presse* («Russen in Österreich: Zahlungskräftig, gut organisiert»). And while both Borovska and Wetz emphatically insist that these stereotypes do not apply to the majority of the more than 20,000 Russians who live in Austria, I wonder how many people actually read the whole articles instead of just glancing at, and remembering, the headlines.

Eva Rossmann uses the global aspirations and simultaneous apprehensions caused by the Russian presence in Austria as the backdrop for her mystery novel *Russen kommen* (2008). Already the title of her book sounds similar to the newspaper articles that I have just mentioned. The similarities between real life and fiction don't stop there: While many business owners are happy about the infusion of money and the Russians' liberal spending habits, they also worry about the visitors' economic and social impact. On top of this, old fears and prejudices from the post-war area still have a strong hold in modern-day Austria and influence the experience of globalization today. Despite profiting from their Russian customers, many Austrians, as described by Rossmann, use grievances from long ago to explain current resentments. A typical example is the owner of a sports clothing store who succinctly generalizes «Die Russen sind eben nicht so zivilisiert, ich meine ... Denken Sie an den Krieg, und was danach alles passiert ist» (14).

This supposed lack of civilization is a red thread that connects old Nazi propaganda, the immediate post-war area, Soviet communism, and contemporary fears and prejudices. Even the protagonist's closest friends are not immune to these feelings. Depending on their own personal life experiences, they focus on different aspects of why Russians are to be feared or looked down upon. Mira's friend and highly regarded political commentator Droch justifies his apprehensions as follows: «Nach dem Krieg haben sich die Russen bei uns schrecklich aufgeführt» (35). Going back to his childhood experiences, he explains «vor den Russen haben wir uns gefürchtet, die waren anders als die Amerikaner mit ihrer Schokolade» (36). Vesna, Mira's Bosnian friend and co-investigator, is just as negatively disposed towards Russians. Obviously influenced by her former life in Yugoslavia, she describes Russians as power-hungry and lacking culture: «Glauben immer, sie sind die Chefs [...] Keine Kultur, nur Macht. Zum Glück jetzt nicht mehr so viel Macht» (27).

According to Barbara Stelzl-Marx, who analyzed the complicated relationship between Soviet occupying soldiers and Austrian women, original resentments of the post-war area are still anchored deeply in Austria's collective memory: «Auffallend ist, dass ursprüngliche Feindbilder und Resentiments der Nachkriegszeit auch vor dem Hintergrund der besonders intensiv tradierten Übergriffe durch Rotarmisten teilweise immer noch fest im kollektiven Gedächtnis verankert sind und Bereiche dieses emotional hoch besetzten Themas nach wie vor tabuisiert werden» (447). Despite at least initial feelings of thankfulness about the liberation from fascism, widespread looting by Soviet soldiers, and the fact that the Soviet government tried to squeeze a maximum of reparations out of their Austrian zone, resulted in resentment and predominantly negative feelings towards the occupying forces (Dornik 455, Bischof 37). The mix of economic hardship, individual experiences of rape and violence by Soviet soldiers, remnants of Nazi ideology within large parts of the Austrian population, and the beginning of cold-war propaganda, provided a rich breeding ground for the development of negative stereotypes about and ill will towards Russians. Any transgressions committed by Russian soldiers thus not only confirmed the racist stereotypes propagated by the Nazis, they also reinforced the anticommunist mood at the end of the war (Stelzl-Marx 441).

Now let's go back from old fears to new crimes. Another common stereotype about the new Russians implies that most of their money has been obtained through illegal means and connections. The Russian mafia, made up largely by former KGB agents, is said to control most if not all business dealings. Already in 1998, the popular Austrian band Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung played with these associations in their song «Die Russen kommen». Money, mafia, former KGB agents, and lots of alcohol are just a few of the stereotypes about Russians that figure as prominently in this song as they do in Rossmann's mystery. In both the song and the novel, the featured Russians, as well as their Austrian hosts, are open to any and all business dealings. And when things go bad and a corpse is discovered, the first suspect is the Russian mafia.

In the Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung song, the quintessential Igor, former boss of the KGB, «macht jedes Geschäft», and Europe becomes «Schlaraffia» for the new «Russki Mafia». In Rossmann's mystery, the oligarch Dolochow invests freely and extensively, both in Russia and abroad. His business dealings with Austrian companies are shrouded in secrecy and straddle the line between legal and illegal. He made his money with oil, steel, real estate, banking and, most importantly, good connections to

the Russian President and other important politicians. His net worth is rumored to be 14 billion Euro, and of course financial power of this magnitude is closely related to political influence. It also fuels dreams of successful co-operations and getting rich by linking one's own future to his name and fortune.

Without delving too deeply into the plot of the mystery, it suffices to say that the «bad guys», in this case Dolochow's twin brother and his unsavory business associates, explore Austrians' dreams of getting rich fast. They tempt Austrian investors with the promise of easy money: potential profits of more than 100 percent, «secured» through Dolochow's vast financial assets. In their promotional literature, complete with a photo of Dolochow shaking the hand of the Russian president, the fake oligarch's direct investment company states that they are looking for strategic partners: «investieren Sie direkt in Russlands boomenden Markt! Überlassen Sie Ihren Gewinn weder Banken noch Börsenhaien!» (189). Evoking the benefits of transnational cooperation, they praise Dolochow as a «true European.» «Er investiert in ganz Europa. Und er will, dass Europa bei ihm investiert. Nur durch Austausch entsteht Stabilität. Politisch wie wirtschaftlich» (191)³.

Both legitimate businessmen and con artists thus use similar strategies, and almost identical language to explain their goals and procedures. They speak of synergies between companies and countries, they point to the enormous volume of construction and the accompanying ability to make money in Russia, and they explain the mutual benefits of having strategic partners in other countries. They also connect with their partners/victims on an emotional level by projecting Russia as the «wild West» or rather «wild East» of the 21st century, a wide open space just waiting to be colonized, offering the fulfillment of unlimited dreams and desires. This double bind of threat and promises corresponds to the way the media is presenting Russia and the Russians. In her analysis of the image of Russia in informational programs on Austrian TV, Eva Binder describes the presentation of Russia as either «Bild der Bedrohung», taken over from the cold war and adjusted to the new political and social realities, or «Projektionsfläche für individuelle und kollektive Ängste, [...] Sehnsüchte und Wünsche» (309).

³ Of course as the 2008 international banking crisis has succinctly shown, foreign investments do not always lead to more stability. There have also been recent allegations about money laundering between Russia and Austria, especially in regard to direct investment companies. See Steiner, «Geldwäsche».

With bold statements like «Wer Russland hat, dem gehört die ganze Welt» (38), the fake investment company also tries to appeal to the central Europeans' quest for expansion. These promises are obviously reminiscent of similar promises made in the past, reminding us of Wilhelmine colonialism and the Nazis' search for «Neuer Lebensraum im Osten». Both then and now, economic reasons have been the main instigator for the desired expansion. Global fantasies are employed in the pursuit of financial and strategic advantages, albeit with some important differences in the way these desires are packaged and sold to the people. Global business connections and cosmopolitan fantasies take the place of racially tainted Nazi rhetoric. Of course ultimately this scheme turns out to be unsuccessful as well – in the fictional world of Rossmann's novel, the would-be investors are being conned out of their money⁴.

Despite describing these potential pitfalls of globalization in Austria, Rossmann's negotiation of this topic is not entirely negative. After all, the appearance of global culture is not restricted to the suspects, but it also extends to those who investigate the crime. Intercultural alliances are necessary to solve the mystery. Most importantly, the protagonist Mira relies on her Bosnian sidekick, Vesna Krajner, a former cleaning lady without a proper work permit who now owns a thriving cleaning and investigations business («Sauber! Reinigungsarbeiten aller Art») and plays a pivotal role in all 13 titles of the series. Like in all novels of the series, Vesna uses her wide network of Bosnian friends and family as well as her Putzfrauen-connections and «cleaning lady» ruse to gather information and gain access to offices etc. In this case, Mira and Vesna are also joined by a Russian interpreter, a Russian receptionist at a hotel in Vienna who Vesna has helped before and who is now willing to return the favor, and a TV journalist who lives in Moscow. These international connections are instrumental in the solution of the case. Rossmann thus not only covers current affairs and new political geographies in Austria today, but she also suggests new ways of dealing with challenges and overcoming old fears. In

⁴ Not surprisingly, Rossmann's mystery also closes on a somewhat ambivalent note. Small-time Russian criminals try to con the protagonist out of 50 Euro after staging a car collision. Mira starts laughing, and the novel ends with her reflecting on greed, criminals, and national pre-dispositions towards crime (spoiler alert!): «Russische Gauner. Aber es waren keine Russen, sondern ein Österreichischer Universitätsprofessor und ein deutscher Unternehmer, die Dolochow gefoltert und umgebracht haben. Gier. Die gibt es überall. Und Verbrecher. Und kleine Gauner. Und solche, die keine sind. Und dann gibt es noch die Menschen, bei denen man nie so genau weiß» (316).

Rossmann's novel, global culture creates the problem *and* provides the solution.

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