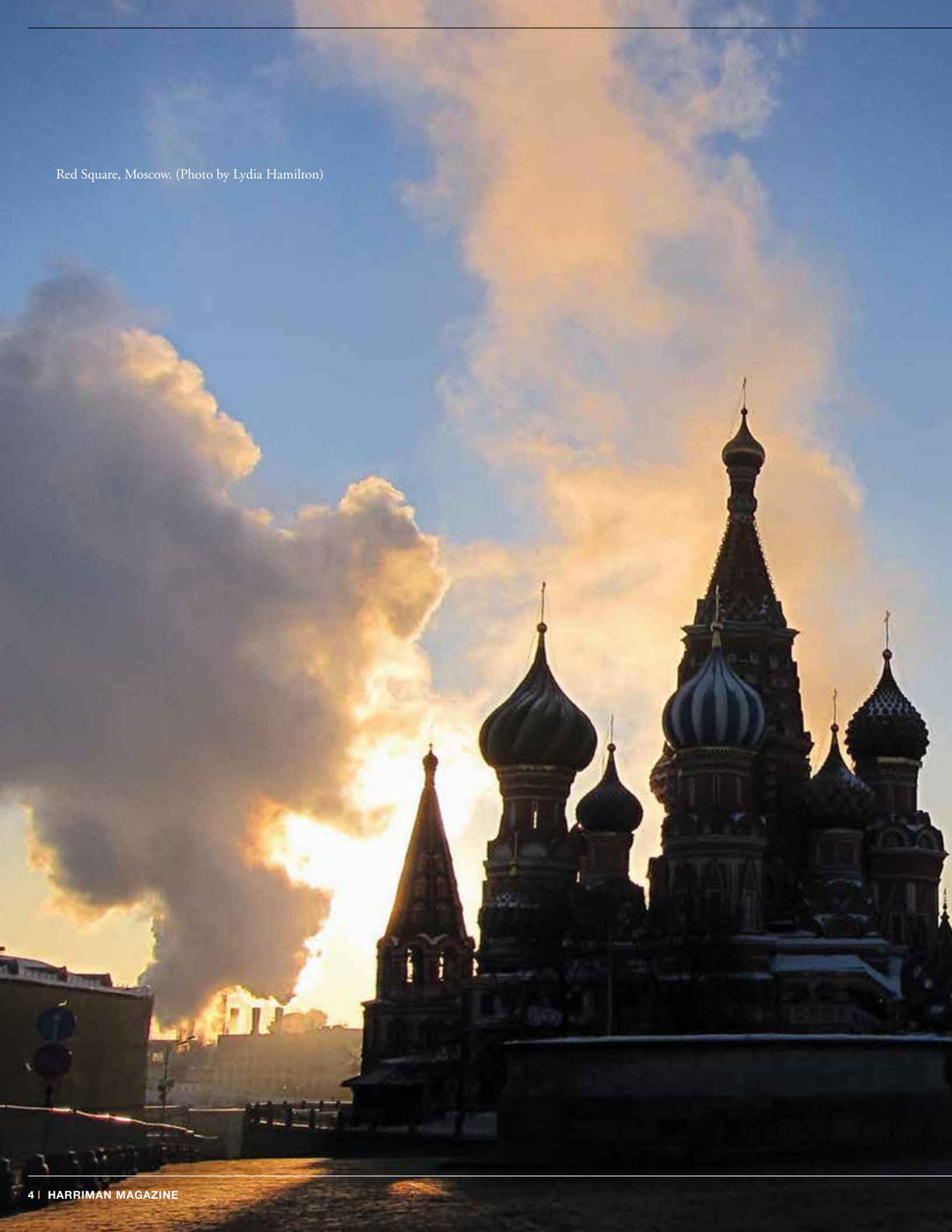


Red Square, Moscow. (Photo by Lydia Hamilton)



MARK POMAR

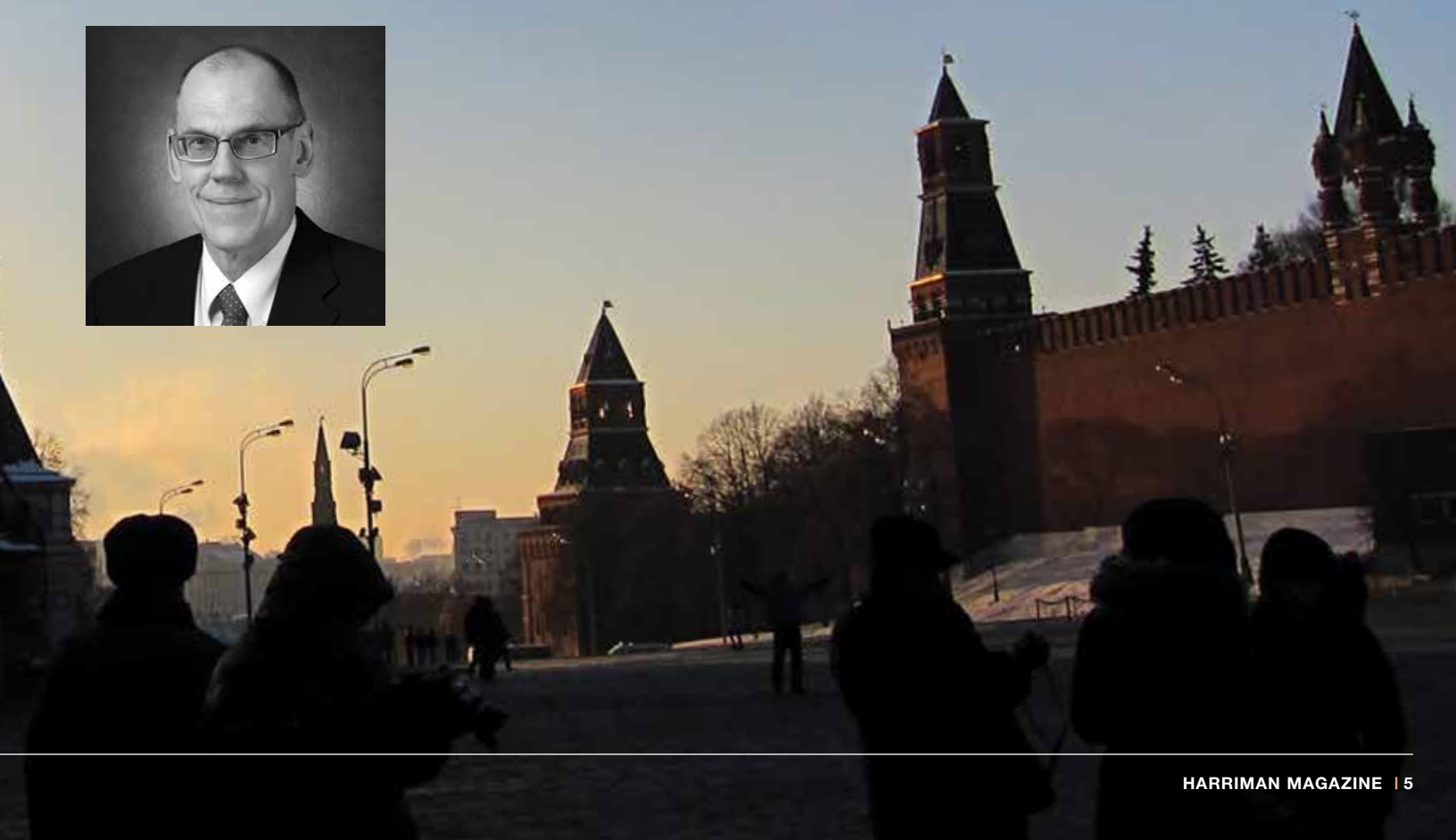
AND THE U.S. RUSSIA FOUNDATION FOR ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT AND THE RULE OF LAW

BY RONALD MEYER

By any measure Mark Pomar (Russian Institute '76; Ph.D. Russian Literature and History, '78) has had a remarkable and varied career: scholar, nonprofit executive, broadcaster. Before taking up his current position in 2008 as CEO and president of the Moscow-based U.S. Russia Foundation for Economic Advancement and the Rule of Law (USRF), Pomar was president of the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), now one of the largest U.S. nonprofit organizations that administers education and training programs worldwide, but in Soviet times it was the great facilitator for US scholars of Russia to be able to conduct research in the USSR. Pomar had studied in Leningrad in 1981 on an IREX grant. Prior to IREX, Pomar served as executive director of the Board for

International Broadcasting and director of the Russian Service of the Voice of America, where he also performed the duties of an “on-air” announcer. A brief resume of Pomar’s academic career includes professor of Russian studies at the University of Vermont (1975–1982), research scholar at the Kennan Institute (1993–1994), author of a monograph on the Russian jurist Anatoly Koni (1996), and scholarly articles on Russian drama, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy.

When Pomar was named president of IREX in 2000, the organization was going through a difficult and painful process of adjusting to a different funding model. Rather than receiving small but regular grants from the U.S. government and a few foundations, IREX now had to compete for every program it



administered. As Pomar stated in our interview, “It needed to be entrepreneurial and to expand beyond the traditional area of the former Soviet bloc. To succeed in this new world, I needed to establish a highly professional development office, form and nurture a team of professional program managers, and ‘go global.’” In the eight years that Pomar was president, IREX’s annual budget went from approximately \$17 million to more than \$50 million, and had offices in 30 plus countries. Clearly Pomar had hit on a winning strategy.

When he was tapped for the USRF presidency, Pomar was intrigued by the possibility of returning to a part of the world that he knew well. Moreover, as he admitted, “the challenge and excitement of being the ‘founding president’ was something I simply couldn’t pass up.” In addition to running IREX, he was also an adjunct professor at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, where he taught a graduate course on nonprofit management. Here was an opportunity to put practical and theoretical knowledge to work by building an organization from scratch.

Asked about the transition from IREX to USRF, Pomar answered that it was “actually quite easy.” He hired several outstanding program officers who had previously worked at IREX, and together they threw themselves into the difficult and rewarding task of creating the kind of organization that he had always envisioned. As he explained, “I was not hampered by any ‘skeletons in the closet’ and knew that the mission of USRF—to support the long-term economic development of Russia’s market economy—could succeed only if we worked in close partnership with the Russian government and leading Russian institutions. Russians had to take the lead and we would be happy to support them.” In the first four years of operations, USRF has provided more than \$14 million in grants, while Russian institutions have contributed more than \$6 million. Pomar is optimistic that over the next several years USRF and their Russian partners will move to full parity.

The vicissitudes of an NGO president are easy to illustrate. One year ago Pomar and USRF were savagely attacked in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*; a year later the same newspaper came out with the headline: “The U.S. Russia Foundation for Economic Advancement and the Rule of Law Is Proud of Its Collaboration with UNN [University of Nizhny Novgorod],” praising both Pomar and the USRF’s EURECA (Enhancing University Research and Entrepreneurial Capacity) Program.

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The two halves of USRF’s title—economic advancement and rule of law—would seem to perfectly complement Mark’s expertise and scholarship. The Harriman Institute has been fortunate to host recipients of the Yegor Gaidar Annual Fellowship, sponsored by USRF and IREX, which is dedicated, as the certificate presented to the Harriman states, to the “strengthening of human capacity in creating a favorable environment for entrepreneurship, economic diversification, technological innovation, and globalization in Russia.” Legal Clinic: Education Based on Practical Experience and Future Lawyers: Essential Skills to Success are just two of USRF’s programs designed to facilitate the rule of law in the private sector. Asked whether he has come full circle from his days of studying the Russian jurist Anatoly Koni, Pomar replied, “Yes. I now have an opportunity to see the Russian legal world up close. It is fraught with many of the same concerns and problems that faced Koni and his colleagues: Russia’s relationship with the West, the establishment of the rule of law, corruption, trust in the legal system, the use of juries, etc.” Pomar noted that many leading Russian jurists today look back to the late nineteenth century as a “golden age” of Russian legal thinking and that jurists such as Koni are finally finding their rightful place in Russian history. He gratefully acknowledged that knowing Russian history and literature is often helpful in establishing a rapport with his Russian counterparts, particularly when he knows certain aspects of Russian history better than they do.

Despite the gloom and doom of much Western reporting on Russia and what he called “a very superficial understanding of Russia in the United States,” Pomar is encouraged by the “sense of dynamism in the country as a whole,” citing the examples of “leading Russian universities committed to commercializing their research and establishing productive programs with U.S. and European counterparts.” He continued this train of thought with examples of NGOs that carry on their work despite government harassment and the new laws on “foreign agents,” the young Russians who are eager to be entrepreneurs, and the many Russian institutions that are open to learning best international practices.

Pomar summed up the mission of USRF amid the diminishing U.S. support for Russian projects as follows: “The goal of USRF is to support this positive dynamism and, in this way, strengthen the ties between Russia and the U.S. Unfortunately, there is less and less support in the U.S. for Russia-related programs. The recent closing of Title VIII—U.S. government support for Russian studies—is just the latest example.” Fortunately, as he put it, “USRF was set up with its own endowment and that will allow us to continue our work regardless of the ups and downs of international funding. It’s a challenge and responsibility we welcome.”

Mark Pomar is a member of the Harriman National Advisory Council and sits on the Council’s Finance Committee. We at Harriman are lucky to have such a staunch friend and advocate as Mark, with his expertise and experience as academic and executive.