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Dear Friends,

These are troubled and exciting times we live in! We were originally scheduled to see a neurologist at the end of January about Oksana's brain tumor, meaning 3 months of waiting for an expert opinion on her MRI results. But through personal connections, as is often the way in Russia, and the Lord's providence, we were able to see a good doctor much earlier!

It turned out that one of my hockey friends said he had just been to see a surgeon acquaintance of his, and he gave us the doctor's number. We called him on a Friday, and he recommended a neurosurgeon, who we immediately phoned and were able to see him the following Monday, on November 14th. He said the brain tumor was small, almost certainly not cancerous, not pressing against anything, and surgery was not urgent! He told us to do another MRI in 6 months and see if the tumor grows. That was a huge praise, so thank you for all your prayers!

And while that was a great relief, we still wanted to know why Oksana has headaches and a numbing pain in her face. So the surgeon sent us to a neurologist who did a Transcranial Doppler (measures blood flow through the brain's blood vessels – I'm learning a lot with all these hospital visits), and he believes Oksana may have a pinched nerve in her spine that reduces the blood flow to her brain. So now we're trying to get a spine MRI, but that specialist has been out of town.

We've done a lot of medical tests, and the costs are quickly adding up. And even though visiting these doctors is technically free, each one expects a decent payment in cash as a "gratuity." I looked into different insurance options (since we don't have any), but I found that we'd pay around \$5000 per year in costs plus about that much again in deductibles, so my dad and I came to the conclusion that it'd be more sensible to gradually put aside money and insure ourselves, so to speak. Insurance wouldn't pay for brain surgery anyway since it's a pre-existing condition, and if Oksana ends up needing it, it'll cost roughly 15-20 thousand dollars, which is about two years of insurance costs.

The best thing to come from all this is that Oksana has really befriended Tanya (in green top), one of the gals with whom she shared a hospital room for 3 days. She's been to our apartment many times, including my birthday and Thanksgiving. We've taken her to church, and Oksana introduced Tanya to two of her cousins who are the same age, and they've taken her several times to their church youth group, which she's really enjoyed. She's become like family, as she loves playing with our girls and watching costume drama films with Oksana. Tanya is from a small village about 600 miles south of Moscow, and for Thanksgiving, we wired her mom some money for a goose, a few broiler chickens, and some tasty homemade butter and cheese. Her mom sent them to us via the driver of a public bus (it's common practice here) who I met at 6am.



The other big news was the December 4th Parliamentary elections, which many felt were fraudulent. Putin's party, United Russia, had a monopoly on the press and used manipulative tactics, such as at every bus stop was a poster (left on photo) with a general call to vote and "influence the country's politics," but then billboards (right) and other signs—using the same skyline, outline of people, color and font—specifically promoted Putin's party. Russians said this caused confusion, and I'm sure it subconsciously influenced people to vote for United Russia.



I can't vote, but I can try to motivate my Russian friends to get involved, especially since many of them think their voice doesn't mean a thing. And in one sense, they're right. There was internet advice to go to the voting booths as near to closing time as possible so that the workers there couldn't steal your vote and give it to Putin's party. In the days that followed the elections, there were countless stories and youtube videos of fraud: people, including a friend at church, came to the booths and found that their vote had already been signed for; whole groups of school teachers and factory workers were told they'd lose their jobs if they didn't vote for United Russia; and then lots of good, old-fashioned ballot-stuffing. Some of it was just comical, as a news report showed the voting results for one region, and the total equaled 146%! (photo)



United Russia officially won 49%, but many exit polls put them much lower. There were small protests in Moscow the first 3 days after the election, and then on December 10th, the opposition to Putin organized a huge "Meeting for Fair Elections." As a teen in Moscow in the 90s, I went to many political rallies, but back then, I was more a tourist with a camera and a desire for adventure. Now, as an adult, I really wanted to attend and support the cause. Oksana, despite being afraid, said I could go, but then my parents, worried there might be violent clashes with police, asked me to stay home. So I followed it online, and even though there were about 70,000 people, it was very peaceful with no arrests. They demanded new elections and a new chairman for the elections committee, as the current person who's in charge of "counting" the votes used to work with Putin. There are more meetings planned for the next two Saturdays, so we'll see what happens. Something big has started, as people are starting to be vocal about their discontent with Putin, and they're realizing that they're not alone, and I can only hope that the momentum will increase. There are presidential elections in March, and up until about a week ago, it was pretty much assumed that Putin would "win" and serve two more six year terms. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wxg_BaBvnEE

While politics is close to my heart, I know that what Russia really needs is a spiritual renewal. In my weekly English club with teens, I try to work the Gospel into different themes. I covered the history of Halloween, including Martin Luther and being saved through grace, and I found out that a lot of the modern traditions come from medieval Catholic rituals, such as carving turnips into lanterns in order to remember their deceased relatives. And for Thanksgiving, I not only taught about the Pilgrims' gratitude to God; but I also shared about how, even in times of uncertainty and fear—like the past few months with Oksana's health—we trust God because He's faithful and true.

Our Youth for Christ team is also helping a church do ministry at an orphanage outside Moscow (photo), and we've put on anti-smoking and anti-alcohol programs in the last 3 weeks. I was in the 5th grade class, and many of the kids sheepishly admitted to smoking and periodic drinking. After some games, showing a video and talking about the dangers of those addictions, we ended by saying that only Jesus can save them. We're hoping to do similar programs in other orphanages and schools, so please pray that the Lord opens some doors.



As I mentioned, we're in the middle of a lot of medical expenses, with a possible surgery on the horizon, so we would be very grateful if you would consider making a year-end gift or join our team of regular supporters. You can send a check, made payable to Ripe for Harvest, to Ripe for Harvest, P.O. Box 487, Monument, CO 80132 (and put #325 on the memo line). Or you can set up monthly "electronic fund transfer" through their website: <http://ripeforharvest.org/donations.htm>

Thank you, and Merry Christmas!

Caleb, Oksana, Karolena & Amelia Kyzer