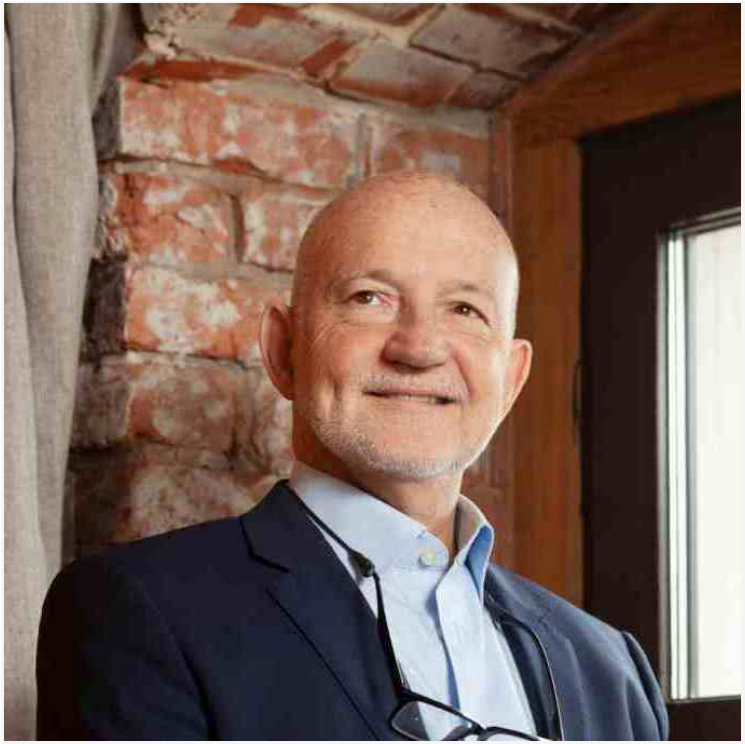

01.03.2025

Rostislav Ordovsky-Tanaevsky Blanco: “We Created Hospitality Industry In Russia”

Rostislav Ordovsky-Tanaevsky Blanco, a descendant of Russian and Spanish immigrants, born in Venezuela, could never imagine that he would have a chance to go back to his ancestral land, Russia, to become the President of the Rostic Group Corporation and Chairman of the Board of PAO Rosinter Restaurants Holding. He is considered to be the founder of the network of fast food restaurants, operating under such famous national brands as Rostic’s, Patio Pizza, Subway etc. Rostislav Vadimovich discussed his business in Russia in his exclusive interview to BM Moscow Foresight.

Today your business operates in America and Europe, and your home is in Russia. Your wife is Russian, and your children grew up in Russia. At the same time, it is common knowledge that your mother is Spanish, and you were born in Venezuela. Do you feel yourself Russian in Russia?

- There was a time when this question was existential for me. It was hard to bear three cultures and to wrap my head around my identity and accept it. If Spain and Venezuela have historic ties, then Russia is a completely different country. I had been looking for an answer to the question, but it just came to me at one point and turned out to be very simple: one day I rode down on an elevator at the World Trade Center in Moscow and realized that I do love Russia and Venezuela and Spain. In Russia I feel Russian, and in Venezuela I feel Venezuelan. This was way back in 1991. It is interesting that abroad they call me

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el russo, and here it would never occur to anybody to call me Spanish or Venezuelan.

My mother (Spanish) and father (Russian) were unanimous in cultivating love of Russia with me. Mother spoke very little Russian, but she was the one to first find a Russian nanny for me, and then a Russian gouvernante. Then I went to a Russian parish school … At my home they mostly spoke Russian. Russian school, diaspora, church… I remember myself when I was 11 years old at a Christmas celebration, in a traditional Russian shirt with a double-headed eagle on my back and with the Russian tricolor flag, reading a verse by my uncle from Canada:

“I raise again my grace cup

And drink for my Fatherland, glorious Rus!

Though I hardly know the country,

I am proud of its name everywhere I am”.

This was the atmosphere of my childhood and adolescence.

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You often mention that your grandfather, Nikolai Alexandrovich Ordovsky-Tanaevsky, the last governor of Tobolsk, emigrated to Europe after the February revolution. Is your famous ancestor remembered in his homeland today?

Yes, of course. There is a museum in the house (Governor House) that my grandfather left in 1917. And of course, there are his things, his photos, telling a story of his life and lives of previous governors. From this house in 1917 my grandfather Nikolai Alexandrovich released prisoners under the first instruction of the Provisional Government and bolsheviks, said goodbye to the people and left for Petersburg, where he was arrested. Later on the Csar's family lived in the house till their execution.

You were 24, when you, a chemical engineer, decided to come to the Soviet Union for the first time. You had a specific view of Russia, how far was it from reality?

Very far. The White immigration lived in line with the traditions and rules, passed down to us by our fathers and grandfathers. And we imagined the Soviet Union as a very tough, orderly and strict country … Before coming to Russia I could hardly imagine that it had a black market, you could buy a lot of things "under the table", I was shocked!

And there you were, back in the USSR … Why did you all of a sudden decide to go to a film festival?

In February 1984 I got a call from the Soviet embassy, the office of commercial attache Valery Vasilievich Legonkov, and was invited to visit a festival of Asian, African, Latin American films in Tashkent. This call changed my life. At this time, I had a film distribution studio with my partners in Caracas, we were copying tapes and dubbing movies, we got the exclusive rights to represent Walt Disney in Venezuela. I was in the loop. The embassy knew that there is a Venezuelan of Russian origin and wanted me to buy rights for several movies to show in Venezuela. This is how I got to the film festival.

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Is it true that your business in Russia was initially connected to Svyatoslav Fedorov's Clinic?

I did not come to Russia to do business. I came with a desire to see the country of my ancestors and find my relatives.

My friend and brother in spirit, George Gan, a Russian German and a successful ophthalmologist at the time, asked me to find Svyatoslav Fedorov in the Soviet Union and to invite him to an ophthalmology congress in Venezuela. Fedorov, naturally, caused a sensation in Caracas, then I sent a delegation of Venezuelan doctors to him for training, etc. This was the first project, after which I understood that something could be created in Russia.

Then came the well-known stories: I ran out of Kodak film and I could not buy it anywhere, let alone develop and print photos, because these were separate service spheres. After a long search in Moscow, I finally managed to buy Orwo film. I made lots of pictures of my family, but they could not develop it in Venezuela, because developing technologies by Kodak were far more advanced.

Second, being in Russia, I never used a guide, once I went to a restaurant for dinner, and it was closed for a special event, the next day I went to another restaurant – it was closed for lunchtime … Later on I got the feel of it, showed my press credentials and they would let me in at any time, but I got the idea that it would be good to open a restaurant.

So, in time I brought Kodak to Russia, and some years later, when I took our Soviet partners in first joint ventures with Kodak to France (Kodak in Russia was supervised by the French office), we had a dinner at a Spanish restaurant at Montmartre, they were always amazed and said that it would be cool to open something like this in Russian cities. I found a person as crazy as me in Venezuela, and he liked the idea. He built a restaurant in Venezuela, then dismantled it and shipped it in two containers to Saint-Petersburg, then to Moscow by rail, and the first Spanish Corner restaurant was assembled in the lobby of the Moscow Hotel in two weeks. This is the adventure that got my caterer story started.

How did you come to the idea to open Rostic's? From haute cuisine to chicken.

Right after my first visit to the Soviet Union in 1984 I had an idea to build a fast food restaurant chain, something affordable and available, not something elite. My acquaintance, David Apelbaum, who founded the Tropi Burger chain and was the leader of the catering industry in Venezuela, got me connected with Burger King, they liked the idea and we started planning to open Burger King in the Soviet Union. We had worked on the project for three years, things were all set … But in 1987 Burger King suspended the project due to high (in their opinion) risks. And at this time I found out that a McDonalds restaurant was being

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built at the Pushkin Square. Then we realized that there already was a major player in the niche, Burger King would not go there and we started working on another project.

We decided to open a fast food restaurant, where chicken would be the staple. My cadet school classmate, Max Azaza, a construction engineer, was building Arturo restaurants (main competitor to KFC) in Venezuela. He came to Russia and brought some people who had worked with him in this sphere in Venezuela, and in 1993 we opened Rostic’s at GUM.

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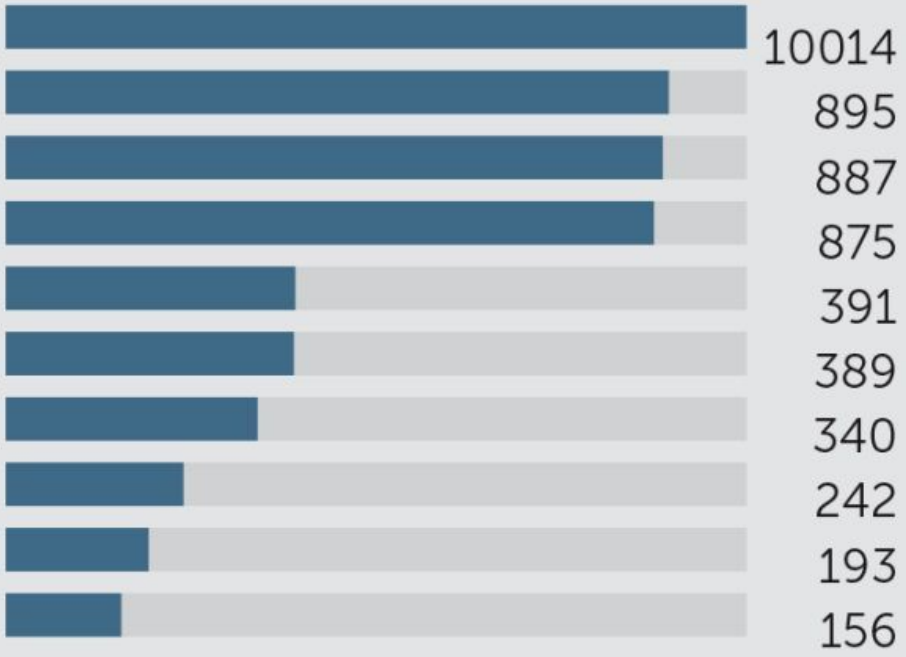
TOP-10 fast food chains in Russia by number of outlets

Data for September 2024, pcs.



*After the American owner of KFC left Russia, some of the restaurants opened under the franchise continue to operate under a commercial concession agreement.

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Why at GUM? Rent payments are exorbitant there!

At the time GUM was the center of the universe. I needed something competitive with the Pushkin Square McDonalds. Rent payments were crazy, but profits did not matter for me. I needed advertisement. This Rostic's ultimately paid for itself in 1,5 years.

Rostic's is a name brand, where did the last letter "s" come from?

I would never have thought of it myself to pick my name as a project title, my colleagues insisted on this name. Our strategy was to build a Russian chain, to counter Western chains. Rostic is brief and clear! Everything Western was in fashion at the time, it sold well, so it had to have this "foreign" flavor to it. Historically they used "s" in Russia to add a "foreign" element, this is why we added "s" to the name. This is the whole story.

How did you create the famous IL Patio brand?

My brother, Dmitry Ordovsky-Tanaevsky, who became more than a brother, but a friend and partner, after my coming to Russia, once invited me for pizza in Moscow, and the dish that I tasted was very far from a real Italian pizza. And then on the spur of the moment I got an idea to open a real pizzeria in Moscow. Once again I put together a team in Venezuela, and in 1993 we opened Patio Pizza (today – IL Patio) at Volkhonka, near the pool and the Pushkin Museum. It was a screaming success! We opened at 12.00 and ran out of all supplies by 16.00. So we had to close it down early.

Did you conceive Patio Pizza as a chain from the very beginning?

Yes, Rostic's and Patio Pizza were from the start designed as chains, there also was "Combi's" (Subway today). But we had standalone projects running in parallel: Spanish Corner, Le Chalet, American Bar and Grill. With time I came to realize that I was working on several fronts, but I needed to focus on something specific, so I went with chain projects.

Why did you sell Rostic's? Did you get a good offer or just got tired from the format?

I was perfectly aware that for competitive development Rostic's would require investments of a different scale. I did not have enough funds of my own even with the income from other projects (Kodak, Patio Pizza). I planned to have an IPO in New York, but the default of 1998 thwarted my plans. I tried to raise capital in many ways, but it was only a small portion of what was

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required to develop the chain in competition with McDonalds and KFC. This is why, to save the brand and for it to stay healthy, I made a very hard and painful for my ego decision to sell Rostic's. But this was the right decision.

Yum! Brands (KFC brand owner) made multiple attempts to buy the business from me, but to no avail. David Novak, President of Yum! Brands, once came to Moscow and we finally reached an agreement.

You have several projects – Rosinter Restaurants, RIG Restaurants, Chicken Factory, Corpestate, you used to have Kodak, Disney… which one is your favorite, and which one is the most successful?

Of course it's Rosinter, we have created the hospitality industry in Russia through this company, we have undoubtedly left a mark in history. I would also say it's Le Chalet, a haute cuisine restaurant. Walt Disney too, we were 24 years old, almost boys, we developed a very successful business in Venezuela. I am a mediocre manager but a good businessman, my strengths are an instinct, capability to create, these were given to me by my parents and God, and on top of that there is management and finance knowledge. All of the above projects used to have a special place in my soul. For example, when they say IL Patio, I recall us laying tiles at 3 am before the opening of the first Patio Pizza…

Why there are no Russian dishes in your restaurants?

I have a great respect for the Russian cuisine, but I do not feel it as deeply as I feel the Italian or Japanese cuisine. I grew up with different cooking traditions and that's why I decided that it would be wrong for me to present the Russian cuisine in Russia. But there were some attempts, there was 1-2-3 Café project with the Russian cuisine.

There are other large projects, connected with your name. For example, Karlson Tourism, which, unlike restaurants, does not focus on the mass consumer, in any case, previously you were content with the individual tour niche. Now, when the West restricted travel of Russians abroad, are you going to change anything, let's say, switch over to the domestic tourism in Russia?

Karlson Tourism also came into my life by "pure chance". In 1995 we bought a franchise of American TGI FRIDAY'S restaurants, and we bought it with the purpose of getting to another professional level with their knowledge base. This brand was managed by Karlson Group, with tourism and Radisson hotel network as its key business. We became partners, and in 1998, when after the default no one understood how to operate in Russia further, the partners offered me to acquire the business. My brother Constantine and I had turned the business into a successful enterprise over five years, and it is still

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operating today.

The West, of course, has shut itself off, including the tourism area, but the East has opened! Karlson Tourism operates in the above the medium segment and in the premium segment, we have our specialization and we have for many years been a key partner for Italian Forte Village, to which we bring 5-7 % of annual turnover. Of course, from 2014 to 2024 we have gone through “hell and high water”, we have lost a lot, but feel rather well in our niche.

You have always been learning... was it “field practice” or did you have tutors?

Of course I had tutors … First, in Venezuela it was Willie Tishenko, who essentially became like a father to me, after my father died early in 1990. Armando Berens, who gave me a lot in spiritual terms, Pedro Burelli, a brilliant financier, who took me from the level of a businessman to a new corporate management level. Svyatoslav Fedorov, of course … there are many-many people to whom I am very grateful for being in my life. I am lucky with people. Even now I am surrounded by people who are better than me in some areas. For example, Vladimir Mekhrishvili, my partner since 1991, with whom we have created multiple projects, Margarita Kosteeva, Rosinter President, we have been working with her for over 30 years. Now the time has come for me to become a tutor and to pass my knowledge down to younger colleagues.

In the West they say today that “anything Russian is toxic”, would you agree?

Yes, I would, but it is mostly related to economic and corporate relations rather than to attitudes toward people.

Are you concerned that your business in Russia or Europe could fall under restrictions or sanctions?

Yes, I am, this is visible, I can feel restrictions, for instance, when I need to get some financial or legal services. The banking system has become a nightmare. However, the West is beginning to understand that the reasons behind the current situation are very complex and focused not only on Russia.

It is no secret that today in Russia consumer purchasing power is dwindling, taking the restaurant traffic down with it. How does the catering market feel in this situation?

The winners today are fast food restaurants, where margins are lower than, for example, in the family restaurant segment, but their turnover is incomparably higher, and so is their free cash flow correspondingly. Moreover, this format is easier to scale

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up, unlike family restaurants, where it is very hard to build a critical mass for capitalization of a brand.

What is your opinion on the future of fast food in Russia?

This niche has operating and growing Russian companies, which need help to keep moving forward. For example, Teremok or Khlebnitsa, each in its niche, these are full-fledged successful projects with excellent results. They need to keep ramping up their professional level to be able to scale up their businesses further.

On a side note, when a company launches a franchise, then at the start it would be a loss-making project for a franchiser, because a critical base needs to be built to start making profits, but going further it would be a very successful and rewarding case.

Long ago, in one of your interviews you said that Russia is a paradise compared to Venezuela. Are you of the same opinion now?

This situation has changed over time. There was a time when Russia was a paradise, there was a time when it wasn't. But let me specify, that when I said we were living in paradise, I always meant and pointed out that this was in comparison to what had been before that. This is because Russia had those massive changes, especially at the start of perestroika, that it did seem so. Now one could criticize a lot of things in Russia, but nevertheless, there is a government that is really governing the country. The laws are largely observed, naturally, there are adverse situations, but overall the laws of business are working, the service sphere is excellently developed. I would like my first motherland to come closer to Russia in managing the country and managing services for the people. For now, Venezuela is still looking for its future path, and I hope it will find one soon.

Interview by Sergei Kron.

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