

Moscow remains the centre of gravity

As Russia threatens to return to absolutism, wealth is flowing to the chosen few in the capital. Yet the city is anything but cosmopolitan. Is Moscow ready for the challenges of the future?

Take a look at Russia's last decade, and two signs are equally indisputable: the revitalization of the economy and the curbing of civil rights. As the concentration of power is on the increase, the country is experiencing a strong centralizing movement towards the capital of Moscow. President Putin has made a habit of interfering in judicial affairs, and is now himself in charge of appointing district governors.

Less freedom

'The chaotic freedom prevalent under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s has been curtailed,' says Victoria Ivleva-Yorke. She is a photographer and journalist for the daily newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, which she characterizes as 'the last stronghold of the free press' in Russia.

Victoria, who is married to a Briton, is a true cosmopolitan. She adeptly compares the cynicism in English and Russian humour in her distinct Queen's English. Her face lights up when we talk about perestroika, and her newspaper is also known for its sympathies towards Mr. Gorbachev. She admits to never having been poor, but her orientation towards the West doesn't prevent her from calling her city of birth Leningrad.

Victoria speaks of the traditional Russian custom of writing letters to the Tsar, and how this was maintained throughout the regimes of Stalin and Brezhnev. 'There are touching stories about how old babushkas wrote to the Kremlin complaining about how they hadn't received their pensions,' she says.

'Today's parallel is a telling tale of the state of the post-soviet society. A couple of years ago an innocent man was arrested and tortured by the police in the nearby city of Nizhny Novgorod. He didn't complain to Moscow, but to the European Court of Justice in Strasbourg. The case was ruled in his favour, and as a result of all the subsequent media coverage, he also received compensation,' Victoria says. 'You can't write to Moscow from the new republics anymore, so there are many Russians there that now place their hopes in Strasbourg.'

No metropolis

The Soviet leaders tried to build international alliances during The Cold War, and a visible sign of this is the Patrice Lumumba University in south-eastern Moscow. This university was established in 1960, at a time when 90 % of the students consisted of young Africans, Asians and Latin-Americans. Even today students from around 100 nations are registered, but the percentage of non-Russians is low.

Despite its recent past as an imperial capital and centre of a global power, and the vast surroundings that gravitate towards it, there is very little in Moscow that resembles the ethnic variety that is found in other comparable cities. Situated in the shadows of one of the large arenas built for the 1980 Summer Olympics, the mosque in the north

is one of the few places that does bear a multi-ethnic imprint. An evening here will offer a study in Central Asian physiognomic variation, but the presence of armed guards around makes the atmosphere a little tense.

It has become more difficult to be a Muslim in Moscow as a result of the hostage crisis in the district of Dubrovka, and Chechens leave here by the day. After the skirmishes during the autumn of 2006, many Georgians are doing the same.

Limited growth

Tanya Bayeva is 29 years old and works at a western embassy in Moscow. She is from the same city as Victoria, but prefers its original name of St. Petersburg. With scarcely five million inhabitants, it is less than half Moscow's size, but it seems that neither of them ever escapes the fate of mutual comparison. Tanya points out that the influence of the Baltic republics, and even Scandinavia, is visible in St. Petersburg. And English is more commonly spoken, even if most political life takes place in Moscow. But Tanya is more interested in another divide:

'In reality, the new Russia is split in two,' she says. 'The poverty that struck us after the collapse of the Soviet Union is still more than evident in the countryside. As a matter of fact, only these two big cities have managed to raise the standard of living somewhat. My actual hometown is just outside of St. Petersburg, and when I recently went home on a visit, I saw with my own eyes how badly things have turned out for my former classmates. I would guess that maybe half of them have become heavy drug addicts.'

I had myself stumbled across a group of people holding placards at the Pushkin square, where demonstrations have traditionally taken place. The group consisted of people from an older building complex on the outskirts of town, and, together with members of the liberal party Yabloko, they were demonstrating against the city mayor Yuriy Luzhkov.

The "Black Raiders"

Mr. Luzhkov has become more renowned as a businessman than a mayor, and he is more than willing to get involved in real estate transactions. As a result, old buildings disappear and are replaced by new ones.

'I have seen with my own eyes the infamous groups of youngsters called "Black Raiders",' Tanya says. 'These are gangs that poke around and check out buildings that house old government agencies, because these are poorly protected today. Anything interesting is reported, and then the real estate mafia moves in.' The face of Russian capitalism can indeed be brutal.

St. Petersburg was built on the marshes by Peter the Great and his Italian architects in 1703, and it is as European as a Russian city can ever get. If it were a human being, it would be a slender white lady, to Moscow's crude and heavy masculinity. A St. Petersburg that has just been through a clean-up is awash with buildings of light blue and green, with ornaments in white and gold, while Moscow is always brown and grey. It is a much older and also much less organized city. The successful tradesmen of bygone times were in the habit of donating small churches here and there, and this

has contributed to the old-fashioned structure of today's city centre, while Soviet style apartment buildings increasingly dominate the further out one gets.

Largest in Europe

Even if Moscow today is Europe's largest city, it is eastern in orientation, and will forever be shrouded in a certain Asian mysticism. The prime examples of this are the onion-shaped domes of St. Basil's cathedral on Red Square, but the former KGB building nearby reveals the other main architectural style: Stalinism.

There is much in Moscow that is changing nowadays, but the surface on which the game is unfolding remains the same.

Even if the statues of Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev have been moved to a cemetery of old icons close to Gorky park south of the Moscow river, and even if Moscow's tourist board is now the fiercest opponent of the suggested move of Lenin's body to St. Petersburg, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that modern shopping habits and Western café life dominate the streets. Moscow's history is too heavy for that. The KGB has changed its name to the FSB, but they reside in the same building, and anyone who tries to take a snapshot of the relief of Yuriy Andropov by the main entrance, will be spoken to brusquely by the guards.

The middle class

The nouveau riches of Russia are their own special breed. Victoria told me that it is a common strategy among the fashion-conscious youth to secretly travel out to the ethnic neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Moscow to buy cheap imitation copies of the coveted designer brands. 'Where could this happen in the West,' she asks rhetorically. (One can of course question who it is that ultimately has something to learn from whom in this scenario.)

It is often said that a middle class of a certain size and quality is needed for a country to transform itself into a democracy, and that the same class will later serve as its guarantors. This bourgeoisie is mostly determined by financial factors, but it is also often characterized by its cultural capital. In other words, the white knights of freedom should eventually become the shopping and reading men and women, and in this respect Russia really has great potential – thanks to its oil and its literary heritage, to put it bluntly. But there is also something missing.

Victoria points out that the civil society in Russia is weak, and the social conscience is not developed. She says that there is little willingness to do voluntary work, and that the purpose of it is often not even understood. I am reminded that president Putin is viewed as a typical representative of the Russian middle class, and she lets it shine through that this is not to be taken as a compliment.

Asian influence

But what about the Asian influence? Almost 14 of Russia's 17 million square kms are in Asia, meaning east of the 2 600 km long Ural mountain range, but three quarters of the population live in Europe. The total number of inhabitants is 140 million, but it is steadily decreasing, and this is a grave problem for Russia. One of the reasons for this is that the average Russian consumes three times as much alcohol as their Western

counterparts. Around four times as many lose their lives as a result of drowning, which in turn is often due to the same factor, excessive drinking.

The Danish journalist Vibeke Sperling writes in her book “Rusland i stykker” (2003) about the eastern region of Khabarovsk. It has only 1,5 million inhabitants, and on the other side of the Amur and Ussuri rivers is the overpopulated China. There are several islands in these rivers that are officially Russian, but, according to Sperling, existing aerial photos show the Chinese pouring sand and stone into the Ussuri to make them a natural part of China.

The Muslim population is also increasing. The big question now is how Moscow and St. Petersburg will be able to absorb the anticipated influx from south and east. If Moscow finally becomes a true metropolis, will the transition be peaceful?