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# Vladivostok Holds Its Breath for Life After APEC

By The Moscow Times

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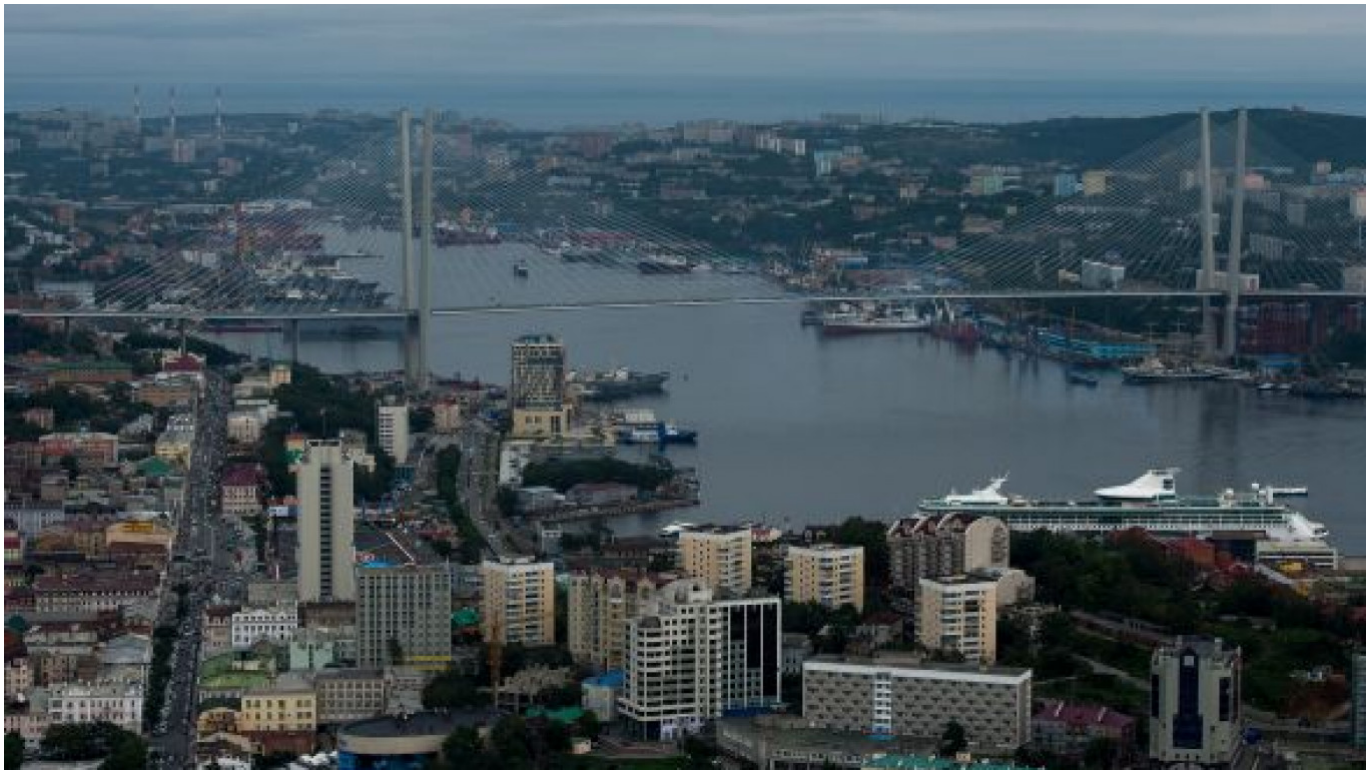

The Kremlin has redecorated Vladivostok in the hope of improving its image in the eyes of investors. Above, a view of the city across the Golden Horn Bay. **Alexander Vilf**

VLADIVOSTOK — Vladimir Lenin's vision of developing Russia's Far East would not be out of place in President Vladimir Putin's talking points for the Asia-Pacific summit he is hosting this week in Vladivostok.

"We will propose that capital from developed countries construct a superhighway between London, Moscow, Vladivostok and Beijing," said the plan, endorsed in 1922 by the Soviet revolutionary leader. "We will tell them that it will open up the untold riches of Siberia."

Ninety years on, the Kremlin has redecorated Russia's window on the east in the hope of improving its image in the eyes of investors from the world's fastest-growing region and reviving its flagging popularity among hard-pressed locals.

Tsarist Russia completed a 9,300-kilometer rail line to Vladivostok in record time, only to fall to the Bolsheviks a year later. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was inspired to develop the city by a visit to San Francisco, another Pacific city on a bay, in 1959.

Now Russia has pumped $21 billion into its eastern seaboard to attract investors, tourists and gamblers from Asia and persuade locals to halt the drift away from a city that, for all the grand designs, remains largely isolated from the rest of the world's largest country. But in Vladivostok, the injection of capital has done little to lift the low regard in which many locals hold Putin.

"I don't associate it with Putin. They took ages to get around to building the bridge," said 28-year-old biologist Yevgeny Skorkin, joining thousands of people on a mass stroll last month over the new bridge across the Zolotoi Rog (Golden Horn) inlet, which opens up a vista across the city's port and the ships of Russia's Pacific Fleet in the harbor.

## CENTER OF THE WORLD

Local artists fantasized at the start of the last century about a bridge that would connect two remote districts of Vladivostok, but the project remained a dream until Putin found $500 million in the budget to build it.

"Only now are we starting to live. We are creating a European city. The center of the world is here!" enthused Vladivostok Mayor Igor Pushkaryov told Reuters in a conversation on the bridge, just as fog started to roll in.

The center of Vladivostok is quiet in the evening, but is at least well lit — in contrast to the murk of the 1990s when the city was plagued by power cuts. Laser cannons mounted atop the bridge pylons play against the night sky. But the foreign eateries and cafes that dot cities in Russia's European heartland, like McDonald's and Starbucks, are nowhere to be seen.

Eyeing a second term, the 37-year-old former businessman hopes that the attention of Russia's leaders will not fade after the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit this weekend: "We really want this relationship to continue. We are happy people. We did it!"

Such positive sentiments are not shared by all.

"Nobody experiences particularly warm emotions," regional lawmaker Artyom Samsonov says of his fellow easterners' attitude towards Putin, who in a national television question-and-answer show in 2007 promised new investments to halt the depopulation of the Primorye region as people sought work elsewhere.

Five years after Putin's volley of promises, the young, educated people of Vladivostok are still leaving, while the city can boast another trophy of regional development — a second bridge built at a cost of $1 billion.

Leaders will sweep in their limousines across the world's biggest cable-stayed bridge — its pylons nearly as tall as the Eiffel Tower in Paris — to the summit venue on Russky Island. They will be put up at a newly built university campus, with some delegates sleeping

in student dormitories.

"You start to think, how much did they spend on this bridge and who, at the end of the day, needs it?" said Samsonov, a 37-year-old opposition activist. "There is no relationship between the costs and the benefits."

## RIGHT-HAND DRIVE

Samsonov's civic initiative was among the first to organize protests against the crisis measures initiated by Putin during the economic slump of 2009, which included punitive tariffs on imports of second-hand foreign cars.

The step helped save state car maker AvtoVAZ from collapse but infuriated many locals, who had supplemented their incomes by bringing in used, right-hand-drive cars from Japan. They took to the streets.

"The authorities were absent in Vladivostok for a number of hours," recalled regional parliamentary Deputy Vladimir Bespalov, an opposition communist. "Police chiefs, regional administrators, the mayor, no one was able to deal with several thousand people who were ready to destroy, wreck and overturn," he said. "The city was on the brink of chaos."

Putin dispatched OMON riot police from Moscow to end the protests.

Even in Russia's tightly controlled electoral system, Putin fell short of an outright regional majority in the presidential election in March. He polled 48 percent in Primorye, far below his national tally of 64 percent.

Konstantin Bovdik, a qualified Chinese teacher, long ago gave up his career in education and made good money — 60,000 rubles ($1,900) per month — working on the Zolotoi Rog bridge. Now, the 34-year-old could lose his job.

"Well, this is it. The bridge is built. The summit will end. And we feel the economic crisis breathing hard down our necks," he said. "All the money goes back to Moscow, and then gets pumped out to London."

Primorye Governor Vladimir Miklushevsky, appointed this year after his predecessor was fired amid a slew of corruption allegations, said the authorities needed to work to restore public trust. "There is a general lack of confidence among the people in the authorities. Power needs to be more open," said the 44-year-old engineer, a native of Yekaterinburg originally brought in to run the new university on Russky Island.

Former Governor Sergei Darkin has, meanwhile, landed a job in Moscow as deputy regional development minister.

"It's spitting in the face of the masses," said Alexander Latkin, the 65-year-old director of the city's Institute of International Business and Economics.

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