

Why Moscow Isn't as Bad as You've Heard

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Nothing irks a Moscow-based foreign executive like an alarmist report in the morning newspaper about an anti-business or anti-Western measure by the Russian government. It doesn't matter whether the newspaper is foreign or local and whether the measure is real or imagined. When the head office catches wind of it, the executive will spend precious time offering reassurances to senior management halfway across the globe.

Alarmist reports have been plentiful in recent months as President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin moved to stifle dissent by cracking down on the Internet, nongovernmental organizations and public protests. The Pussy Riot case made the judicial system look as if it had been transported from the Dark Ages.

Many headlines about Russia are justified. And we cannot forget, of course, that the very definition of news implies some sort of conflict; after all, a ho-hum event might be important, but few people will pick up the newspaper to read about it.

Moreover, a foreign investor has to do his homework, as in any country, and consider risks like bureaucracy, corruption and the court system.

But Moscow is not trapped in the Dark Ages. As the Kremlin seeks to showcase Russia at the APEC summit, which opened Wednesday, here are four positive developments that you might have missed in the headlines or, if you live here, overlooked in the bustle of everyday life.

1. Simplified travel visas. U.S. investors can rejoice over three-year visas, which will replace one-year visas next week. The groundbreaking agreement, initiated by Washington and two years in the making, is the envy of many countries. The Kremlin is keen for visa rules to be eased for Russians, so visa deals with other countries may be in the offing.
2. Approachable officials. With Kremlin instructions to show that Russia is open for business, government officials are increasingly willing to listen to and act on suggestions and concerns. It helps, of course, to know the official's press secretary or some other aide personally. But if all else fails, catch the official at a business conference or social event, or ask a foreign business association for assistance.
3. Wired Moscow. Soviet-style waiting lines still exist, but they often can be avoided these days thanks to technology and the e-government program. Utility bills, cell phone bills and Internet bills can all be paid at one of the thousands of payment terminals scattered across the city and via an increasing number of online payment options. Moscow also is one of the best Internet-connected cities in the world, with easy access in almost every neighborhood, high speeds and low monthly payments for unlimited traffic. Government agency sites are amazingly simple and useful. At the Federal Tax Service's site, for example, you can enter your individual tax number to find out whether you owe taxes.
4. Eased transportation. OK, traffic jams are a big problem. But arriving in the city, getting around, and leaving is much easier. All three airports boast new terminals and are connected to central Moscow by high-speed trains. The high-speed Sapsan train also links Moscow with St. Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod, making it a favorite for foreigners who want to avoid the hassle of airports and, in many cases, save on travel time. Within Moscow, where the gypsy cab was once the only reliable taxi, many taxi companies have sprung up.

The list could go on to include more lofty achievements like Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization and the chance that soon the U.S. Congress will finally lift Cold War trade restrictions. But those developments have been well-covered by the media — including those whose reports sometimes prompt that worried phone call from the head office.

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