The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

10 Good Things About Putin's Russia

By Richard Lourie

February 09, 2014



The news out of Russia has mostly been bad — and deservedly so. Things have been going steadily downhill since the great protest march on the eve of President Vladimir Putin's third inauguration in May 2012.

But some perspective has been lost in the process. There are good things about Putin's Russia as well. Here is the top 10:

1. You can leave. Andrei Sakharov, leader of the Human Rights movement in the Soviet Union, insisted that the No. 1 human right was the right to leave your country, otherwise you are living in a prison house. It is unfortunate that some people still have to flee Russia, but it is fortunate that they can.

Customer service has
improved, there is less anti-
Semitism and Russians are free
to pray and leave the country if

they want.

2. You can pray. In my experience, it is a lot easier to find believers who are intelligent and fun in Russia than it is in the U.S. A Russian can be a member of the intellectual class and still follow the Orthodox Church's complex schedule of fasts. For all the cozy hypocrisy in the relations of church and state that the Pussy Riot punk rock group mocked in its prank at Moscow's main cathedral, it must be still counted as progress that believers can openly worship now without fearing social or economic loss as in Soviet times. That also raises the question of how long today's Russia should be compared to a Soviet yesterday.

3. You can open a business. What once were capital crimes are now career choices. The streets of some Russian cities now are now displaying more individual capitalism, the little stores with personality that lend color and variety to street-level life. Shopping is no longer an expedition. All sense of adventure has been lost. If you want something, you buy it — including on the Internet. E-commerce is a booming business in Russia. All you need is money, the new tyrant.

4. The Internet is free. My rule is that a country without a free Internet can never be called free, whereas a country with a free Internet can never be called entirely unfree. The perverse irony here is that modern authoritarian regimes may actually prefer free Internet and social media because it makes it easier to track and monitor dissidents. Case in point: Protesters on the barricades in Kiev received the following text message: "Dear subscriber, you are registered as a participant in an unsanctioned rally."

5. You can eat. When I used to travel to the Soviet hinterland, I always carried a salami, bread and a knife. It was perfectly possible to end up in a town where there was no restaurant open and no food in the stores. Recently I had a few nice meals in Murmansk in the Arctic Circle. Everywhere you look there are sushi restaurants, which somehow has become the emblem of modern dining sophistication — much like being pro-gay rights has become the emblem of the modern, civilized mindset. We'll know that Russia has arrived when we start seeing gay sushi restaurants popping up not only in Moscow, but in the conservative hinterlands as well.

6. There is less anti-Semitism. Or maybe it has simply been exported to western Ukraine and Europe. In reality, of course, Russia's xenophobia and bile has been refocused on Central Asian guest workers and natives of the Caucasus. From time to time, you can see Orthodox Jews in black coats and hats, long beards and payis walking down city streets unself-consciously, lost in their own conversation and oblivious to the fact that they are in the country that gave the world the words "pogrom" and "Pale of Settlement."

I was amazed and gladdened when there was no detectable outbreak of anti-Semitism over the fact that so many of the oligarchs were Jewish. Of course, there is still some anti-Semitism in Russia, but perhaps only just enough to prove the old bitter maxim that anti-Semitism is hating Jews more than you should.

7. Weak commies. In a country once totally dominated by Communists, it is a pleasure to see them now as a mostly toothless opposition — often literally — whose existence helps keep up the appearances of tolerance and democracy. It also gives Westerners who remember the Cold War the opportunity to look at real Russian Communists who still sincerely believe all of that

ideological claptrap. Their spectacular historical failure has now sent some Communists back to their original function: helping society's poor and forgotten.

8. Smiles and good service. In the bad old days, smiles were rare in general and service was often called "unobtrusive" — meaning that the waiter or salesperson was nowhere to be found, having simply disappeared probably to stand in line for chicken or toilet paper. Service with a smile was outright inconceivable. Now Russians smile more often and more easily, and service is definitely speedier, probably because chicken and toilet paper are readily available in stores.

Nonetheless, you can still get the old-fashioned service with a scowl. On the bullet train between Moscow and St. Petersburg, the stewardesses are quick to bring you a surprisingly tasty lunch, but they slap it down on your tray and disappear to deal with things more important than customers like gossip and makeup. The Soviet Union dies hard.

9. Alexei Navalny. It's wonderful that today's Russia could have a wise-cracking corruption-fighting whistle-blower like Navalny. He is a person of intelligence, integrity and sufficient stature to worry Putin, especially after Navalny won an impressive 27 percent of the vote in September's mayoral election in Moscow. There have already been efforts to cripple him with phony criminal charges resulting in a conviction that may disbar him from any future political runs for office. There may even be efforts to crush him even more completely than that. At least he can leave the country — as of this writing anyway.

10. Everything that always made Russia wonderful no matter who rules from the Kremlin. The list includes vodka, jokes, excellent conversation, passionate friendship, vodka, heroic hospitality, banyas, a love of art and music, a sense of vastness reaching from steppe to space, vodka.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/09/10-good-things-about-putins-russia-a31886