

Russians Feel a Tempest Brewing

By [Ivan Sukhov](#)

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Moscow is already packed with snow and the usual holiday traffic jams, but the mood every evening in the metro is far from festive. Anyone who rides the outlying radial metro lines will encounter ample cause for conflict on an almost daily basis.

Every metro system in the world is plagued with an aggressive drunk or drug addict now and then. And not only in Russia do passengers avoid the offending individual with the help of earphones, tablets or by just pretending that nothing is wrong. And not only Russian police are capable of fining somebody for causing a public disturbance when, in fact, the person was trying to protect someone else from wanton aggression — as happened in Moscow last week.

What is peculiar to the Russian capital is the increased level of aggression seen this past year, even while the willingness to confront that aggression has remained just as low as before.

This disparity is only one of the less obvious signs of the declining health of Russian society. Such signs are accumulating in various areas of public life, each signaling a malfunction like the "dead" pixels that appear, one by one, on an aging monitor screen.

Most of these problems do not seem to affect the underlying social and political foundations of society, but that foundation is already suffering tangible effects from the steadily worsening economic situation. Although it cannot be proven scientifically that an increased number of cracks in the facade is directly linked to greater seismic activity that threatens the building's foundation, the sheer number of such cracks naturally makes onlookers want to maintain a safe distance from the structure.

These "cracks" are numerous and varied.

Never before in post-Soviet history have Russia's service sector employees shown such a blatant disregard for the basic requirements of their jobs. It seems as if every single shop, service-oriented business, private company and government office along with municipal employees, bank managers, railway conductors and waiters at second-rate restaurants have simultaneously returned to the Soviet custom of barking rudely at customers. No trade deficit has yet appeared, but the negative attitude that accompanied the deficit that preceded the Soviet collapse is already here.

Perhaps never before in all of Russian history has the level of professionalism in all spheres dropped so precipitously.

Newly built road interchanges are made in such a way that after the first snowfall pedestrians must clamber over roadside mountains of black, half-melted snow containing a mix of anti-icing agents and mud.

This taxing daily struggle for survival in Russia calls to mind the words of the mayor of a small Finnish town above the Arctic Circle who, when he visited Moscow in the early 2000s and learned how much money the city authorities spend on cleaning snow from the streets, remarked that frankly such a sum could clear all the snow from Russia right up to the Ural Mountains.

Even in an expensive medical clinic, Muscovites risk receiving treatment from nurses who have not learned how to hook up an intravenous drip.

Municipal plumbers spend two months fixing a leak in your plumbing, but in the end you are forced to take a wrench in hand and become something of a plumber yourself.

In at least five out of 10 cases, consumers receive inferior goods or services, or else the products themselves are fine but the delivery or sales process is so bad that it is simpler to do without them.

The bricklayer who perfectly restored the fireplace at my dacha went on such a drinking binge with the down payment I gave him that he was physically unable not only to haul away the debris from the job, but even to pick up the rest of the money I owed him.

For some unknown reason, the private clinic where my wife sees a highly qualified medical specialist creates such horrendous lines and obstacles when issuing basic medical documents that she ultimately had to seek treatment elsewhere.

The objective state of everyday reality in the Russian capital only makes observers smile whenever a senior official — who finds it increasingly difficult to hide his frustration over

the falling ruble and oil prices — publicly tries to persuade investors not to cancel their projects in Russia. Promising market conditions were the only thing that attracted that venture capital in the first place. When those disappeared, so did their passing interest in this vast, ethnographically interesting but enormously inconvenient and monstrously inefficient country.

Those Russians who still don't have citizenship in some other country or a one-way ticket out of here have no choice but to think deeply about what it would take to rectify the shortcomings of a social system that is breaking down before their eyes.

Of course, the prospects for resolving these problems look even less appealing than any of the authoritarian experiments yet implemented by President Vladimir Putin's administration. A few years back, then-President Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama pressed a button to symbolically "reset" U.S.-Russian relations. However, in a Freudian slip, the Russian version of the word was written as "reload" — an action more fitting for a rifle than a computer.

The real question is: Who will reset Russia's social system? Obviously, not the current administration. Any change of administration — even according to the time frame and procedures stipulated in the Constitution — can evoke many fears and questions. That is true of any major change.

However, in the life of any country a situation can arise that requires a clear choice between positive change or stagnation and decline. At such times, only the collective will of the people can generate sufficient will to begin the process of change. And yes, sometimes the awakening of national consciousness begins with struggling over a mountain of dirty and snowy slush on the side of the road.

Change always involves risk. What begins as reform often ends in revolution. The whole world knows — from Ferguson to Kiev. And changes always come as a surprise. Did we know one year ago how the world would look in December 2014? And one year from now, the world will look just as different.

A hundred years ago in 1914, the world also changed beyond recognition. The long period without war during which borders seemed to disappear and the prospects for economic development and social progress seemed limitless ended abruptly in the trenches of Belgium and western Ukraine.

The current long period of relative peace also seems to be coming to an end under the roar of mortar fire in Donetsk, Gaza and Kobani. We must all make a supreme effort to ensure that the winds of change — sometimes gaining hurricane force — do not destroy all that humanity has built during the quiet years, and that we do not ourselves get buried under the rubble of political and social edifices that rightfully deserve to crumble and fall.

Have a merry Christmas and a happy new year!

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