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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Enough, but for How Long?

Will Russia still be friendly to foreigners after the World Cup? I hope so.

By Loretta Marie Perera

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Reuters

A few months after I moved to Russia, I was stopped by a police officer just outside the Moscow metro. "You!" he barked. "Come this way."

I was new to the country, and given his stern tone and my weak language skills, I didn't see much scope for asking what I had done or why I was being led away.

At the police station, I was taken to a small room where the issue became clear: My fellow detainees were all people of color. Perhaps more to the point, none of us looked Russian.

After 30 minutes of questioning and having our documents inspected — mine were all valid — I was released. But it wasn't the last time I would have an encounter with the police because of

my skin color.

There are hundreds of thousands of football fans from all over the world in Russia for the World Cup this summer. In general, they are singing the praises of Russian hospitality, charm and friendliness. To visiting fans, concerns of racist attacks might seem unfounded. But the World Cup version of Russia is not the Russia I moved to two years ago.

"*Russia's xenophobia isn't just about skin color. It's about understanding how the country works.*"

How frequently, for instance, have I been held up by security guards for "random" bag checks and passport inspections? (I recently asked my American, blond-haired, blue-eyed partner how often he has been approached by police in the metro. "The only time I've ever been stopped by the police in Russia was with you," he replied sheepishly.)

Then there's the Russian stereotype of being frowned at on public transport — which is especially alarming when you're the only one in the entire carriage who looks like you, or when the frown comes from someone who could pass as a skinhead.

In the two years since I arrived in Russia, however, I've noticed a gradual change. It's not so much that the police checks have stopped, or even that people are no longer glowering at me on public transport. It just seems to be happening less often than it used to.

Russia's brutal winters have made my skin the fairest it can possibly be, but I don't think that has anything to do with it. I'm starting to realize that Russia's open and unapologetic xenophobia isn't just about skin color. It's also about understanding how Russia works.

My friend Adewole Opeyemi Dele, 27, moved to Russia from Nigeria in 2008. Although he said racism is rampant in Russia, there were two options: dwell on it or figure out how to integrate. "I felt that the only way to understand Russian people was to learn the language and learn the culture," he recently told me.

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Ten years later, Adewole says, racism is especially prevalent in the older generation, but "Russians under 40 are more and more exposed to foreigners and less and less racist." Having said that, when he speaks to older Russians in fluent, grammatically correct Russian, "They fall in love with you immediately."

Adewole's encounters rang true of my experience, too. While skin color is apparent immediately, it is not being able to fit in that seems to offend most. It is not knowing how to acclimatize that is most jarring to Russians. Perhaps the reason I get fewer glares on the metro and on the streets now is because I've learned how Russians behave and I know how to act accordingly.

Halfway through the World Cup, two white American fans were talking loudly on an otherwise quiet metro, annoying both me and an old Russian man, who looked on resentfully. I recognized that look. But usually I've been on the receiving end of it. I shrugged, he shook his head in response. Damn foreigners, we silently agreed.

In that exchange, I realized that after two years I have, for now at least, achieved a level of acceptance — brown skin and all.

Adewole told me he believes that the World Cup will have a lasting impact on Russia's attitude toward foreigners. "[The majority] of people here are really, really nice to foreigners at the moment," he says. "If five, even 10 percent keep that welcoming spirit, that's good news for Russia."

I'm hopeful too, but let's see how long this lasts.

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