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7 Unexpected Ways Western Sanctions Have Affected Life in Russia

By Leyla Latypova

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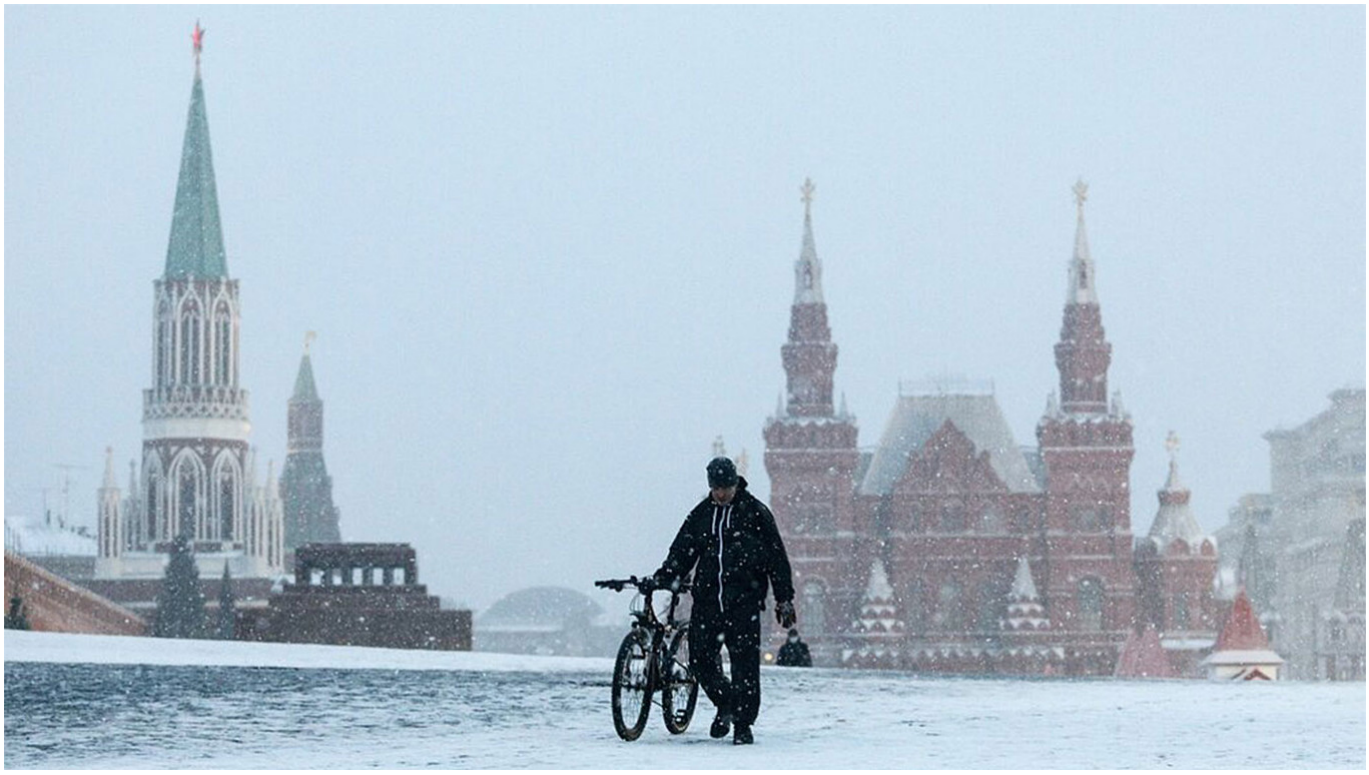

Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

Western sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine may not have resulted in the dramatic economic collapse some predicted — but they have still had a far-reaching impact.

Russia is now the world's most-sanctioned country and shortages of goods, limited access to services and other restrictions are slowly changing everyday life in sometimes surprising ways — from altered candy recipes and slower internet speeds to shuttered crematoriums and fewer buses.

Nine months after Russia's attack on Ukraine, we identified seven unexpected ways in which sanctions have made themselves felt:

Changing candy recipes

The head of a confectionery factory in the Ural mountains city of Perm said in October that the plant, one of the region's largest, had been forced to alter the recipes of some of its products after Western sanctions cut off imports of key ingredients.

"There are raw materials that objectively cannot be produced in Russia. For example, cocoa beans do not grow here," Boris Shvaytser said in an interview with local news outlet 59.ru. "[Obtaining] many components became problematic."

In addition to changing recipes, the factory, according to Shvaytser, has also been forced to look for new equipment after suppliers from Italy, Germany and the U.K. halted cooperation.

Slow mobile internet

The speed of LTE mobile internet in Russia has dropped by an average of 0.6 megabits per second compared to the same time last year, according to a March study released by Russian information analytics agency TelecomDaily.

And internet speed problems are expected to worsen as the exit of European telecoms giants — including Nokia and Ericsson — makes it harder to modernize Russian networks.

Some Russian mobile operators have repurposed frequencies used for 3G networks for LTE cellular services, the pro-Kremlin Izvestia newspaper reported last month. But the tactic is unlikely to resolve the issue in the long run, according to experts.

Shuttered crematoriums

An award-winning crematorium in the southwestern city of Voronezh was forced to shut this month after its only cremation chamber — produced in the Czech Republic — broke down.

It's unclear whether it will be able to reopen as the faulty oven cannot be replaced due to a European Union ban on export of high-tech goods to Russia.

Russian specialists and representatives of the Czech cremation equipment provider, Tabo-CS, are working to repair the oven but do not know how long it will take, according to the Voronezh-based news website De Facto.

According to its website, Tabo-CS cremation equipment is used in dozens of other cities across Russia, including St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk.

Fewer buses

Local transport operators in 84 Russian cities have canceled as many as 200 bus and trolleybus routes this year, according to research by modeling company Simetra.

One of the reasons for the changes is sanctions-related disruptions to supply chains which, in turn, have impacted Russia's vehicle manufacturers.

The work of the Tikhvin Freight Car Building Plant in the Leningrad region, for example, was

put on hold for more than two months over the summer because it ran out of U.S.-made ball bearings essential to the manufacturing process.

Identity card U-turn

The Russian authorities have been looking to replace the country's internal passport system with a digital national identity card since at least 2013 — and new plastic cards were even due to be trialed in some regions this year. But Western sanctions have forced the authorities to freeze the project indefinitely.

Among the reasons for the U-turn is that Russia cannot produce enough chips and plastic to make the cards, Forbes Russia reported in June.

Empty buildings

The number of vacant spaces in Russian office buildings and shopping malls continues to grow as a result of the exit of major foreign retailers.

The share of vacant space in shopping malls in the capital Moscow is estimated to hit 17% by the end of the year, according to data from real estate consulting firm NF Group reported by Russian business daily Kommersant earlier this month.

And 12% of office buildings in Moscow will be empty by the end of the year, according to a representative of CORE.XP consulting firm cited by Kommersant.

Poorly trained pilots

Airline pilots in Russia have fewer options for training after Turkey's national carrier Turkish Airlines reportedly banned Russian pilots from using its flight simulation training devices.

The ban was apparently imposed because of Turkish Airlines' fear of falling victim to secondary sanctions from the EU's Aviation Safety Agency.

Turkey's decision is likely to be significant given that not all types of flight simulation training devices are readily available in Russia or friendly partner states, according to experts surveyed earlier this year by independent media outlet The Insider.

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