

Sociological Reflections on Contemporary Moscow

Tim Delaney shares some observations from his trip to Moscow for the 4th Congress of Philosophy.

I was honored with an invitation to speak at the Fourth Congress of Philosophy held at Moscow State University (MSU) in May last year. As anyone who has visited the MSU campus can attest, the university is large (over 40,000 students) and is occupied by many buildings of structural marvel. An impressive-looking new library has just been constructed in less than three years. I took part in a tour of the new library and was amazed by its facilities, and although it is not ready for student or professor research at the moment, it is expected to be running at full capacity by September.

It isn't easy to gain admission into Russia. It is one of the few countries that still require a visa for entry as well as a valid passport. Academic visas, the preferred version for an academic conference, require an official invitation from Russian authorities. The notoriously slow pace of Russian bureaucracy is very nerve-wrecking for a fast-paced American like me (although this is not to suggest that Americans aren't also faced with great bureaucratic challenges in the US). My traveling companion and fellow Congress participant Tim Madigan and I decided to turn to an agency for our visas, as the official invitation had not yet arrived two weeks before our departure date. We decided to pay the one-week processing fee of U.S. \$150. Interestingly, there was an additional processing fee of \$50. In essence, we paid a processing fee to have our processing fee processed! The scariest part of this visa application ordeal was the fact that we had to mail the agency our passports so that they could complete the paperwork. Citizens of any country are routinely advised not to surrender their passports. (We would have to surrender our passports again in Moscow for bureaucratic purposes). Twelve days later and just two days before we were scheduled to fly to Moscow our passports and visas arrived in the mail.

The flight to Moscow was a little more than nine hours nonstop from New York City's JFK airport. I flew coach on the Russian airline, Aeroflot. The Aeroflot symbol still includes the Communist hammer and sickle emblem. As an American youth who grew up during the Cold War, the hammer and sickle emblem still seems a little alarming to me! The service was good and the flight attendants friendly. Flying into Moscow brought back many memories, as I had participated in a different conference in Moscow in 2001. (I've also been to St Petersburg, having attended another conference there in 1999.)

I was really looking forward to my return visit to Moscow. I was very curious as to whether there had been any significant changes in the past four years. One thing that struck me immediately was the continuing growth in construction. Numerous buildings under construction four years ago were completed and many more under way now. There are many more cars on the Russian roads today. President Putin said a few years ago that he wanted more Russians to be able to afford automobiles, and that is certainly the case. A much greater variety of car manufacturers were represented, as well. Cars from Europe, Japan and the US are as popular as domestic Russian vehicles. Most cars are cheap and lack air conditioning. It was refreshing not to see the many SUVs that dominate American highways and cause such huge environmental damage. Traffic jams and congestion are common in Moscow's busy streets. Oddly, vehicles involved in an accident are required to remain in the position that their collision took place, rather than moving off to the side so that traffic can continue to flow. It's rumored that most of the expensive cars in Russia are driven by people with connections.

Entering Moscow on a tourist visa presented many complications, especially because I was staying in a dorm at the MSU campus. The room itself was far less spartan than in 2001. It was of adequate size and equipped with a refrigerator and cable television. Lacking a firm grip of the Russian language made television viewing quite challenging. I mostly watched sporting events. It's odd to see which American programs have been picked for dubbing into Russian. Making

reference to the refrigerator is significant because Russians haven't grasped the idea of using ice to cool drinks. Man-made ice is basically unheard of, and it is nearly impossible to find ice machines anywhere in Russia. Cold drinks became a mere memory of my distant homeland. The stores and street markets have coolers, but the drinks are not in there long enough to cool off. Drinking warm beer was not the best way to find refreshment during a record Moscow heat wave. A few nights we brought beer back to our hotel refrigerators and waited for them to cool properly. We would sit outside on the building steps and watch the residents walk by. Many students played badminton and other sports in the quad area. It was a fascinating array of cultures.

My first full day in Moscow was spent securing an entry stamp on my visa. This procedure, in essence, makes a tourist legal to be in Russia. Russian law requires such a stamp within 72 hours of arrival in the country. Because of the tourist visa, MSU officials weren't able to stamp our passports. We now had to find an agency that would provide this service (for a processing fee of course!). The street address provided on the website of the agency we had used in the US wasn't valid. Thankfully, our host Professor Razin was able to find the correct address and, after a tiresome search, we found the agency willing to stamp our visas. We were informed that the stamp was valid for our exit out of Russia but technically we weren't legally *in* Russia, so we were advised not to get injured or arrested while in Moscow. A slightly ominous warning to foreigners.

Without access to an automobile we had two choices to get to the visa agency: ride the Metro or hitchhike. Hitchhiking is a fascinating phenomenon in Russia. Pedestrians hail cars by raising their arms. Before long, a motorist will pull over and offer a ride for a nominal fee. Hitchhiking is so common that American professional basketball player Sue Bird reported in *Sports Illustrated* (First Person: Sue Bird, Seattle Storm Guard, June 6, 2005, pp.28-30) that she often hitchhiked while in Moscow. Hitchhiking, common in the United States during the 1960s, is very rare today. We are taught not to take rides from strangers. Apparently it is quite safe in Russia. Still, we took the Metro!

The Congress officially began on Tuesday, May 24, with a grand reception (the plenary session) in the main building of MSU. The room was filled to capacity and delegates were greeted by numerous speakers. It became evident what a huge occasion this Congress really was. Although I was never told the official number of participants, several sources put it at over 2,000. Most were from Russia, of course, and I was one of only a handful of Americans invited to present a paper. Everyone seemed in great spirits. Most of the delegates taught at various colleges and universities throughout Russia but had attended college together as students at MSU or at St Petersburg State University. Thus, the Congress served as a reunion for many. This became increasingly clear at the various receptions we attended. Much reminiscing occurred over toasts of vodka and wine. I will never forget one Russian scholar from Siberia who half-jokingly mocked us (two Americans and a Moscow Russian) for drinking screwdrivers (vodka with orange juice). You don't drink vodka with juice, he said, you drink it straight. Not wanting to insult my Siberian colleague, I offered a toast over a shot of vodka. Such are the cultural expectations!

The structure and design of the Congress sessions was very different from other conferences I have attended. Elsewhere, each session typically has three or four presenters, and sessions are planned in detail well before the conference begins. By contrast, at the Congress session (on Ethics) where I was scheduled to present, there were 100 people registered, the majority of whom never showed up. We had no idea of the order in which we would present our papers, and whether it would be in the morning or afternoon. The session began at 9:30am in a crowded, hot room. The morning session lasted three hours without a break. Thankfully, I was able to present my paper just before we broke for lunch. I also presented at a Friday session on humanism as a value system, headed by a Russian colleague, Valerii Kuvakin, who has attended many conferences in the US. His session was far more typical of Western conferences. Refreshments were available (juice and water no vodka), questions and answers followed presentations; presentations were kept to a 20-minute limit, and so on.

Professor Kuvakin provided Tim Madigan and me with a student guide, Raisa Barash, who was well-versed in English. Raisa, aside from being quite academically intelligent, provided many cultural insights from the younger generation's perspective, a generation which was not raised under Soviet rule and which therefore has a very different outlook on life to that of its parents and grandparents. Although a little disenchanted with politics (in what culture does youth trust politics?), young Russians have reason to have hope in their homeland. Capitalism and retail are the norm for these Russians. And when people are given a taste of creature comforts they are unlikely to surrender them.

One afternoon we were walking around Red Square with Raisa and her roommate Leeza when they drew my attention to something quite profound, sociologically speaking. A black man walked near by and our Russian guide commented to us, American. Because there is little racial diversity in Russia (although there is clearly a huge ethnic diversity), there are very few blacks to be seen. So few that Russians, apparently, assume they are American. Suddenly I became quite conscious of this racial makeup. Russia is predominantly a white country. There are a number of Asians, but by and large the faces in a crowd are white. This racial reality held true in such public places as riding the metro, where once again, nearly every one was white. John Rocker, a professional baseball player in the United States, was publicly scorned when he shared his observations of the famous Train in New York City. He commented how everyone riding the train were a bunch of foreigners who did not speak the native language. Apparently Rocker would be much more comfortable riding the metro in Moscow than the subway in New York City. Of course, he would have to learn to speak Russian and realize that he was now the foreigner.

The Moscow Metro is significant in its own right. The long downward escalator ride to the surreal, Communist ideology-inspired underground palaces (or temples) feels like a trip back in history and even into a parallel world of sorts (*Moscow Times*, The Moscow Metro: A Parallel City Under Your Feet, 25-31 May 2005, p.12). A good deal of the underground Moscow world still contains great works of art. (Although it should also be pointed out that capitalism is evident throughout the Metro as many more shops occupy the Metro today than four years ago.) Equally impressive is the lack of graffiti. As an American who studies and writes about street gangs and graffiti it is refreshing to see so little of it around Moscow, but especially on the underground.

The subway system was originally designed by Joseph Stalin in order to link the Kremlin with key buildings, command posts, airports and plush country retreats. There were even secret underground rails reserved for the Communist Party elite. Thus using the subway was once considered highly prestigious. Today the elites drive fancy automobiles and are oblivious of traffic lights on the streets above the metro. The cream has risen to the top. As Adam Kleszczewski wrote in the *Moscow Times*, today beautiful women do not use the Metro. The implication is that beautiful women will have rich boyfriends and they no longer use the underground, but instead, race above on city streets in expensive cars. But having ridden the Metro several times, I can say that beautiful women *do* still ride the Metro.

Riding the Metro reflects a couple of glaring cultural norms of Russians. For the most part, Russians are patient people. They have to be, as they routinely wait in long lines due to the overbearing bureaucracy that confronts them. Higher ranking people sometimes cut in line and those waiting grudgingly accept this intrusion. Patience is also demonstrated in the face of the lack of pragmatism in Russia. When entering any of the MSU campus buildings, both for the Congress and the dorms, one realizes that only one door is unlocked when there are numerous other doors available. The pedestrian traffic flow is slowed to a snails pace as people have to exit and enter the same single door. Surprisingly, everyone meekly accepts this. No one questions why the other doors remain locked. I mentioned this to our guide and she seemed puzzled by my question. Her only response was, maybe it is too windy to have all the doors unlocked. There was no wind that day.

However, Russians also like to move along. They push as hard as any New Yorker on a subway to get on and off the train. They don't share the American cultural norm of personal space. Americans expect a certain zone of free space where others don't crowd too closely to us. We have numerous rules that guide this cultural norm. This is especially true while waiting in line to purchase food items or using ATM machines. It is quite unnerving from the American perspective to have our personal space so violated. Russians seem to crowd ever so closely as they attempt to move along bureaucratic lines, metro cars and city streets.

One of my favorite things to do in Russia is visit the dacha of my friend and colleague, Alexander Razin. *Dacha* is a Russian word that refers to land plots. Owning a dacha is very significant in Russia and has only been legal since 2001. Lenin banned land ownership in one of his first acts after seizing power in 1917. Communists believe in state ownership of land. Putin's 2001 decree granting Russians the right to buy, own, and sell land came ten years after the Soviet collapse. Although only a small fraction of the country's property is available for sale, private land ownership is critical for economic development. Dacha ownership is also viewed with a strong sense of pride among Russians. Fully aware of the significance of Alexander's dacha I looked forward to the two hour drive outside Moscow. As most large urban cities are quite similar, it is important to see the countryside of any nation in order to get a real feel for its people and culture. Among the sights on the way to the dacha were grazing animals on country land and a monastery that dates back to the mid-1600s.

Riding along in the Russian countryside reminded me of Upstate New York, my birthplace, with its hills and green pastures, and hard-working people trying to make an honest living, all the while hoping to spend time with friends and family. In that regard, and through many more examples, I am left with the impression that Russians and Americans are very similar and would make strong allies. We have far more similarities than we do differences. The Congress theme of Philosophy and the Future of Civilization afforded me many opportunities to reflect on my own thoughts regarding the future of civilization. Despite the very real fear of terrorism that exists throughout world, I am encouraged by Congresses that bring diverse people together who are afforded an opportunity to openly discuss their philosophical ideas about life and society. International diplomacy is often accomplished by real people who visit diverse cultures with an open mind to learn about people who have a different outlook on life than they do. If only we could all be given an opportunity to sit down and break bread with people of different cultures, concentrating on the similarities and tolerating the differences, then there might indeed be a future for civilization. Dr Tim Delaney 2006

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