

# The best – and worst – of times

Over breakfast in the Moscow Hotel I asked a visiting Russian who had been working in New York for the past 10 years what had changed in the Soviet Union since he had left.

"Everything," he said. "They are trying to change everything."

That the Soviet Union is undergoing momentous political times is immediately apparent. When I boarded my Aeroflot flight in Madagascar I was handed a copy of the "alternative" weekly *Moscow News*, an experience somewhat equivalent to arriving on an SAA Jumbo and receiving the *African Communist* from the friendly air hostess. The cover story was headlined "The bloodshed goes on" with a large photo of grieving women against a backdrop of Soviet troops. The content generally – sympathy for Red Army deserters, scorn for the bureaucrats and the communists, support for the democrats. *Moscow News* was the alternative press in the early days of glasnost. Now Moscow is served by a number of contentious noisy opposition papers. When you speak out for the first time, you shout.

Everywhere in Moscow – politics. Switch on the TV and probably most channels are carrying it. Everyone has an opinion which they are keen to share with you. On the economy, the political personalities, the army and the KGB, the secessionist republics... most opinions differ from each other. Debate tends to be fierce and passionate. There is anger around.

This year has been crucial for democracy in the Soviet Union. Milestones have been passed. The first free democratic campaign for the presidency of the Russian Federation had just begun when I arrived.

As striking as the politics however is the poverty. Most people are poor. A standard salary is around 300 roubles. It is just enough to get by on – to pay the rent, to get to work, to eat – provided you have a state flat where the rent is very cheap. Outside the tourist hotels and churches shawled women with babies sit in stylised misery and plead for money. I was surprised by the number of beggars.

**The Soviet Union, like our country, is emerging from a long dark winter. DAVID SCHMIDT of Idasa gives his impressions of a recent visit to Moscow and Leningrad.**

In the grounds of the Kremlin stands the Tsar Gun, in its time the largest cannon in the world, and the huge Tsar Bell which cracked in the foundry. "The gun that never fired. The bell that never rang. The two great symbols of Russia," mused the philosopher Herzen in the 19th century. And as I watch the dead-eyed young woman in the GUM store across from the Lenin mausoleum slowly add up my purchases on an abacus while her colleagues stand around talking as the queue grows longer, I add to the list "The system that never worked".

The failure of the economic system is apparent everywhere. What is less apparent is what can be done about it. Every few months a new great economic plan is unveiled.

"In the Soviet Union, people don't work any more. They go to meetings or stand in queues," observed Igor my guide. Central to rebuilding the economy is fostering a work ethic and a sense of enterprise. Initiative has been crushed out of the vast majority of population over years of the great repression. They have never had access to wealth creating property, they have been excluded from economic decision-making, they have been given no responsibility, work has been about following orders and



The Tsar Gun in the grounds of the Kremlin.

plans to the letter of the law. Work as drudgery. When the coercive discipline of the past is lifted, people work even less.

The queue syndrome is part of this. While some queues like those outside the liquor stores, do reflect shortages, most I encountered were bureaucratic. They exist because of the absence of any sense amongst the ticket-sellers or shop assistants that the consumer is important. No one complains about the pace of service. If you do, you might not be served at all.

Bureaucratic red tape continues to severely limit the emergence of individual enterprise. But it is the absence of dreams that that seems to be more retarding in the long term. I notice that all the private cars in Moscow are dirty although it is spring and there is no water shortage.

Moscow is the saddest city. Virtually every young person I met was beset by despair. A profound hopelessness haunts the streets. People hang around on the corners and in the queues with no energy or joy. Prognoses about the future are inevitably grim.

Everyone told me that I should have been in Moscow three years ago. Then there was hope they say. The processes initiated by Gorbachev promised not only freedom but economic prosperity. Freedom indeed has expanded and been consolidated. The economy however has stagnated still further. Food supplies have fallen. Most disturbing of all for people who, if nothing else, have lived in the knowledge that prices will stay the same in perpetuity and one will always have one's job, prices are soaring and unemployment threatens. There is no longer any security.

Passivity and passion exist very close to each other in Moscow. The same people who illegally marched with courage and determination for democracy are also the people who express no hope in the future.

Russia is a study in contrasts. The manifest democratisation driven from below by the people, the economic stagnation and creeping impoverishment that threatens it. The passion of the people and the passive resignation. The best of times, the worst of





Moscow: now served by a number of noisy opposition papers.

times. Everything changes, everything remains the same.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union lays host to a range of ideological tendencies and factions – neo-Stalinist socialists, democratic socialists, social democrats, liberals...

Dr Alexander Buzgalin, professor of economics at Moscow State University, is a member of the Central Committee of the CPSU and an ideologue of a tendency called the Marxist platform. "The Marxist platform is not easily placed on the continuum between neo-Stalinist and liberal ideas," he says, "it is about finding a new approach, about finding a democratic basis for real socialism."

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### **'But it is the absence of dreams that seems to be more retarding in the long term'**

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A democratic basis for real socialism – this is the new language also of the South African Communist Party but what is the substance to the rhetoric?

"In the near future we will have a market economy. The construction of a new socialist project must accept the market as the system of economic regulation.

"The public and co-operative sector must establish their economic superiority over the private sector through real economic competition. This means by being more efficient."

The Marxist platform sees its future in terms of building an alliance with the mass democratic movement. "This movement is the only obstacle to a new dictatorship. It is too weak to take power itself, but it can prevent dictatorship."

At this point, however, the emerging independent trade union movement and others have generally aligned themselves with the Democratic Russia bloc, the broad coalition of non-communist forces that has spearheaded the drive for democracy within the Russian Federation.

Democratic Russia was formed in the build up to the March 1990 elections for all the major city and district councils as well as the Russian Federation Supreme Soviet. The Moscow Peoples' Front which had emerged as the most influential opposition grouping thrown up by the democratic ferment sparked by perestroika, pulled together the well-known independents who had broken with the Communist Party such as Yeltsin, Popov and Shobchak to form what was essentially an election campaign organisation that endorsed candidates for the more than 2 000 positions to be filled.

The bloc had limited infrastructure and no organisation or even contacts in vast areas of the Russian Federation. But because of the massive reaction against the Communist Party, Democratic Russia had great power and their endorsement was prized. Requests for endorsement came in from hundreds of candidates from across the federation. More than 200 candidates it endorsed were elected to the 800 places in the Russian parliament.

A critical strategic decision however was to concentrate efforts at the local city level. "Here are dormant democratic structures, let's take them over and democratise them." Gavril Popov was a national figure but chose to run for the Moscow City Soviet. Illya Zaslavski elected to the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1989 ran at the district level in 1990. The "democratise from below" idea proved to be an inspired tactic. Democratic Russia supporters gained majorities in the city soviets of both major cities, Moscow and Leningrad. Popov, as soon as he was appointed chair of the Moscow City Soviet, immediately appointed the two key organisers of Demrussiya as his first deputies. The Moscow City Soviet had become a powerful organising base and de facto headquarters of the movement.

Yeltsin, like a number of important non-communist leaders, is not formally part of the Democratic Russia movement or any of its constituent parties, even though they continue to form his primary electoral infras-

tructure. "This does create a very awkward situation, because it means that they are not accountable," acknowledges a Democratic Russia activist, "but I consider it to be a transitional phase. You must realise that the concept 'party' has very negative connotations here in the Soviet Union. It works for Yeltsin to be above party politics."

Yeltsin recognised early on that new rules for the political game had been thrown up by transition. While Gorbachev manoeuvres, Boris Yeltsin talks to the common people. No serious Soviet leader will ever again be able to ignore the common people.

"What's the main result of perestroika?" asks Adam Mishin in the *Moscow News* of May 12. He answers: "The swamp has been stirred to life, air bubbles are coming up to the surface and strange noises are being heard. 'Hi there, swamp creatures! You mustn't live like this!' And the echo reverberates, 'Like this...'"

If there is one certainty about transition, it is that it amplifies the contradictions and crises that precipitated it. The Pandora's Box is opened and releases not only the capacity for co-operation and compromise but also the ethnic chauvinism, base prejudices and violent urges repressed in the soul of the people.

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The despair overshadows the possibilities of the new. This was true in Moscow. It is also true in Johannesburg. People have less hope in the future now than in the darkest days of repression.

The overwhelming memory of my brief visit was of democracy being built. It is the glasnost which we still have to attain here with our closed political cultures.

I was often humbled by the seriousness with which some people took the democratic project. I was also stimulated and inspired. And I am glad Adam Mishin concluded his article in the way he did. "Surprisingly", he writes, "hope is still alive. Emaciated and shaky, it's still there, stirring within me. And I am thrilled."

The Soviet Union like our country is emerging out of the long dark winter. The creatures of the night still prowl in the thickets. The trees are bare. The weather report warns of possible further frost. But the grass is growing again. □

David Schmidt is the regional director of Idasa in the Western Cape