

Tolstoy's Bicycle

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In 1895, at the age of 67, the nobleman and writer Leo Tolstoy decided to learn to ride a bicycle. The image of the old man wheeling around Moscow on the new-fangled contraption, flowing beard in the wind, embodies the paradoxes and the urge to modernize in today's Russia.

Visiting Moscow in August, after an absence of nine years, I was struck by the dramatic changes. When I was last there, in 1998, the country was jokingly referred to as "the Wild East." A free-for-all grab of the former Soviet state properties was underway, with clever oligarchs figuring out how to take control of oil and gas companies, factories, real estate, and radio and television broadcasting. Long lines snaked down the block from banks, where depositors waited to redeem their rubles, whose equivalent was one dollar to a fluctuating four-figure number. The war in Chechnya raged, and tattered beggars reached their hands out on the street corners.

Today, Moscow shines with newly restored buildings, five-star hotels, casinos and a gigantic cathedral built by Moscow's Mayor Lushkov to replace the magnificent one dynamited by Stalin in 1931 in his drive to wipe out organized religion. Ultra-fashionable Muscovites patronize chic restaurants like Vanil (where the scent of vanilla, for which it is named, wafts through the air supply in the restrooms). GUM, the former state department store on Red Square, whose few goods in the Soviet period included thick wool stockings, dowdy linens and plastic shoes, now features Italian leather boutiques, designer furs and high prices. The war in Chechnya has thankfully been pacified, and the horrible terrorist incidents common a few years ago – like the school kidnapping at Beslan, apartment bombings and the killing of hostages at a Moscow theater – have ended.

Russians have clearly traded some measure of freedom for this stability and prosperity. A journalist or parliamentarian who criticizes the Putin government too loudly is likely to meet with trouble, including being poisoned or shot to death. Thirteen journalists have been killed in the past few years, including, most prominently, last fall, Anna Politkovskaya, who wrote about Russian atrocities in the Chechnya war. I was distressed to learn that the husband of one of my colleagues, a member of parliament who was investigating the state security services, was apparently killed by poisoning.

Even though Moscow's good fortune has not yet permeated the countryside – stories abound that small-town former professionals

now keep cows in their backyards for milk, since their traditional jobs have disappeared – most Russians seem satisfied with this tradeoff. And the Putin administration's strong hand has catapulted Russia into a new role as a very wealthy, and potentially powerful, country.

Having ousted the oligarchs and renationalized many of Russia's oil and gas resources, as well as broadcasting, publishing and other former state industries, under Putin Russia's state coffers have swelled with the rise in oil prices. The world's second largest oil producer, Russia now has a budget surplus in the billions. The government has set up a stabilization fund, essentially a development bank, as the repository of these funds. Moscow gossip pegs running this fund, by the way, as a potential landing place for President Putin, assuming he abides by the Russian constitution and cedes power to a newly elected administration in 2008.

For the country's long-term prosperity, the Russian government now must move from exporting resources to a knowledge-based economy, with science and technology creating value, as they do in the powerhouse economies of Europe, Asia and the United States. The Putin government has identified five areas – nanotechnology, life sciences, alternative energy and energy-saving technologies, information and telecommunications, and environmental technologies – as key to Russia's future, and advised government ministries and agencies to pursue these. Government resources, including the stabilization fund, are being used to stimulate development in these areas.

I chair an American foundation that funds scientific R&D in Russia. We heard from Russian officials in August that they now look forward to working with us as a partner, providing their share of the funding for our joint projects, rather than simply accepting U.S. assistance. This is timely, because in 2008 the U.S. government is ending the Freedom Support Act, the chief source of our aid, judging that Russia can now stand on its own financially.

The U.S. and Russia still have many core interests in common, such as fighting terrorism and weapons proliferation, and the opportunities for business partnerships are expanding rapidly. But Russia's new wealth also creates international influence and an interest in pursuing activities – such as relations with Iran – that will not always be comfortable for the U.S. Successfully managing this complex, paradoxical relationship with the new Russia will require as much balance and skill as, well, Tolstoy riding a bicycle. □



Photo by Amanda Leung



Tolstoy's bicycle in his Moscow home

Photo by Dr. Gloria C. Duffy