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New Russia adjusting well to market economy

Hardev Kaur in Moscow

MOSCOW: The market economy has changed the face of Moscow. It is no longer a drab, dark and colourless place. The city, which celebrated its 854th anniversary last weekend, is buzzing with activity and gives the visitor the impression that many Moscovites are trying to make up for lost time.

A toll booth greets the visitor on his trip to the city from the Sheremetyevo 2 airport. The VIP lounge has to be booked in advance and paid for by the passenger. It costs 925 rubles and credit cards are welcome. The small number of officials at the VIP lounge have to deal with the new rich Russians who prefer and can afford to pay for the necessary procedures in comfort instead of queuing up for immigration and Customs clearance.

The city itself is a hive of activity with cars of all makes, models and colours - no longer just the black Russian makes and the limousines of the Soviet era - jamming the roads.

The latest in fashion is paraded on the streets by the girls who are just as fashion conscious as the men.

Billboards scream out the many Western fads - designer clothes, fast food and the latest in electronic gadgets.

Many more Moscovites speak English. Katernia and Julia both in their early 20s speak fluent English and studied it in Moscow while some of the older generation such as Dr Romuald G. Tomberg, an adviser to the Asean-Russian Cooperation Fund, has no problem with the English language.

He has been responsible for drawing up Russian and even the Soviet strategy on the Asia Pacific region.

However this was not the case in 1987, during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to the then Soviet Union. Hardly anyone spoke English, at least not in public, and certainly not with members of the visiting Malaysian delegation.

The interpreters who accompanied the journalists gave little information except for what was sanctioned by the authorities. It was difficult then to obtain information for even the most simple of issues, and making photocopies of documents was out of the question.

Today not only is photocopying available in most places but Internet facilities and information is readily available. It is also easier to hail a taxi, or a private car, something that was extremely difficult previously and especially for journalists who were looked upon with great suspicion.

Food is no longer the long item on menus that Russia and other hotels used to provide but with very little actually available.

Everything that the journalists had asked for from the menu in 1987 was "Nyet".

In the end they had to settle for what was available - hard buns with tea and serunding which one of the Malaysians had brought along. That was dinner the first night and breakfast the next.

Today Moscow is almost a gourmet paradise with food from around the world and other former Soviet regions. The visitor can have a meal at anytime of the day or night.

Room service at the major hotels is available 24 hours. The menu is also quite substantial - with a mixture of Russian and Western cuisine, including pastas. Out on the town one can even settle for McDonalds, Sabbaro Pizza, etc.

The new Russia is moving forward and while there are problems and challenges of adjustment to the market economy, there is no desire to go back to the old system. This is so even of those who may not be as well off today, but having tasted "freedom, they do not want to go back to the Soviet era and its way of doing things.

Dimitiri, on a flight from Moscow to Yakutia in Siberia on the way to a fishing trip with his friends into the Arctic, says "life is good for 10 per cent of the people and harder for the 90 per cent".

He hastens to add "but those are the challenges that we have to deal with and we no longer have equality with poverty".

Previously everything was done for the people, even for the far flung regions of the country, from planning to the delivery of goods and services - even if they did not come on time or were not the quantities or the quality that was desired and needed.

They did not have to think about it. It was "command and control" from the centre - Moscow.

While some things have changed and the differences are quite obvious, vestiges of the Soviet era still exist.

The old Soviet mentality of waiting to be told what needs to be done still prevails in a number of cases and areas. The senior officials still do not have the "open door policy". Each time something needs to be discussed, no matter how trivial, even like where to go for a meal, the discussion will take place behind closed doors.

In some industries, including the aircraft plant in Kazan, the old attitude still prevails. But just next door, the helicopter plant competes with the best in the world with sales to more than 60 countries including the US and one can be forgiven for thinking that it is a "Western" operation.

Now the regions have to plan for themselves, something that they are not used to nor equipped to do. In Yakutia, Siberia, the end of the Soviet era also saw the stoppage of the last rail link between Yakutia and Irkutsk. This is not all, many other communication links, including roads, have also been "abandoned".

The lack of communication in this isolated place is a major problem and made even more difficult by the severe winter conditions when the temperatures fall to between 50 and 60 degrees below freezing.

"It is here that one is able to listen to one's own breath". Dr Irina V Speranskaya explains it is so cold that one's breath freezes instantly and as it "cracks" one can hear the sound of ice or frozen breath.

But there is a desire to move forward in some areas no matter how difficult it might be.

There is even forward planning. In Yakutsk, the capital of Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, the Deputy Mayor Valery P Dorjiev proudly shows the dykes being built to prevent the Lena river from overflowing as it had done in Lensk, a town upstream.

Restoration efforts are also underway and Dorjiev says some of the rich merchants and owners of the old historical buildings have been encouraged to rebuild their old homes, maintaining the old architectural styles. Many have come forward in what is described as Yakutsk's privatization efforts.

But undoubtedly many of the regions and individuals are still trying to come to terms with the new environment that they have been thrust into.

Even though it has been 10 years since the fall of the Soviet Union, "but when we have been used to a system for almost the whole of our lives 10 years is not sufficient to change one's mindset. But we are getting there", Dimitri adds.

The change over to the market economy, according to Dimitri, has also weakened the Russians, and thereby leaving the US as the sole power.

There is a need for a counter balance, he says, adding that his stint in the US had convinced him that a unipolar world was not good for anyone - not even the US - as it made Americans more arrogant and caused them to make mistakes that the rest of the world would eventually have to pay for.

Russians have embraced the market economy and there is no turning back.

There are a lot of challenges but the fast changing attitude, especially among the younger generation is likely to see the country change even more rapidly in the next 10 years than it has in the last 10.