

Reflections from Moscow

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Tverskoy Boulevard, Moscow, by [Sergey Rodovnichenko](#)

Winston Churchill famously described Russia as a "riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma." This reflection on contradictory trends and impulses in Russia was clearly on point during a recent visit to Moscow.

There was, to be sure, a palpable tension in the air at Sheremetyevo airport, since Moscow's other major airport, Domodedovo, had been the target of a [terrorist attack](#) just one week before on January 24, with more than 30 dead among scores of injured. The tense mood was reinforced in the banner headline of the English-language daily, *The Moscow Times*, of that day: "Rebel Leader Promises Year of Tears"—this the ghoulish pledge of Chechen terrorist leader Doku Urmanov, who claimed to have up to 60 suicide bombers at his disposal. On the other hand, the same edition of the *Times* featured a picture of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev seated at a PC as an introduction to a piece celebrating

Russia's burgeoning market value in information technology. And the more positive mood was underscored by an article headed "New START Treaty Goes Into Effect," with a beaming handshake exchange between U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

The enigma spills over from the columns of the press. Staying, as most American business visitors do, in a Western-appointed hotel within a square mile of the Kremlin, and dining in one of the chic (and very good) Georgian restaurants in the neighborhood, the air is one of Moscow bustling and thriving, choked with traffic snarls that makes New York arteries look positively free-flowing. A new Four Seasons hotel is under construction—just opposite the Ritz-Carlton—on Tverskaya, the elegant main boulevard that stretches from the Kremlin and Red Square to Pushkin Square and beyond. The neighborhood is populated by sable coat-clad women and their escorts, and it is only when one descends to the underpasses that are essential means of crossing Tverskaya that "real life" intrudes, in the form of kiosks selling trinkets and snacks; old women forlornly offering what look like desiccated sprigs of heather, for sale for the ruble equivalent of a few pennies; and beggars, plain and simple.

Of course, one does not have to go far to encounter the "other" Moscow, the "other" Russia—the outskirts of the city are pockmarked with blocks of drab apartment buildings. But outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, harsh reality sets in, with a vengeance. It is captured in yet another article from *The Moscow Times*, written by Reuters correspondent Amie Ferris-Rotman, "[A Glut of Heroin and Denial](#)," in which Russia's societal stresses and strains are starkly viewed through the lens of the country's heroin addiction crisis. The following data are taken from Ferris-Rotman's account.

The statistics behind the human tragedy of addiction are staggering. The government admits to 1.8 million heroin addicts among its citizens; nongovernmental groups and the UN put the total at almost twice that. At a rate, therefore, of almost 2 percent of the population, this gives Russia the dubious distinction of third-highest heroin abuse rate per capita in the world—behind only Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan, of course, is the source: more than 20 percent of that country's annual production of 375 tons of heroin (fully 90 percent of global production) finds its way into Russia, through the porous borders between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and thence through the other Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. According to official government estimates, Russians bought \$17 billion worth of street-traded heroin in 2010, and the dire consequence is at least 30,000 heroin-related deaths per year, fully *one-third* of global fatalities linked to the drug, and a critical negative factor in the population loss that Russia has suffered since the Cold War's end.

The official response has been a mixed bag. On the one hand, intervention at source has been fairly robust; in October 2010, Russia sent troops to join U.S. forces in raids on Afghan production centers. On the other hand, Russia's record in prevention and treatment at home is seen as feeble. There is, in particular, a lack of strategic approach that would deal with the heroin crisis and the inextricably linked HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia, which the World Health Organization says is among the fastest-growing in the world. According to nongovernmental

organization sources (foreign NGOs have recently been prohibited from working with heroin addicts in Russia) the two most glaring gaps in addressing the twin crises are 1) the Russian government's refusal to finance harm-reduction programs such as needle exchange programs for registered addicts; and 2) a similar refusal to legalize methadone, a powerful and internationally recognized drug that eases withdrawal symptoms for addicts seeking to quit the heroin habit. Indeed, the penalty for use or distribution of methadone, up to 20 years incarceration, is as harsh as that for heroin. The result of all this is that Russia has—depending on whether one accepts official government or UN/NGO estimates—between 500,000 and one million *registered* HIV-positive individuals. (Clearly one might conclude that there is overlap between the heroin and HIV/AIDS statistics and that the latter may well be higher than the "registered" statistic.)

The picture painted here, grim as it surely is, points to the utter inadequacy of the Moscow-centric confines of so much of the business or leisure visitor's exposure to Russia—including one's own. On the other hand, one harks back to Churchill's musings, now more than 60 years ago. And one takes on board the realization that the cataclysmic events of the collapse of the Soviet Union are just 20 years past, and that the state of affairs in the United States in 1796, or in France in 1809, or in Britain from the execution of Charles I to the Restoration of his son in 1660—to list but a few of the now "established" democracies—was hardly one of well-ordered universal prosperity.

For Russia, given a combination of internal societal challenges, the terrorist threat, and other factors mentioned here, the task will be long, and it will be arduous. But Russians have learned patience, endurance. This thought occurred when walking back to the hotel one bitterly cold February night, on a sidewalk that was more a skating rink: outside one of the ostentatiously upscale Western boutiques was a man, hoe-like tool in hand, doggedly chipping away at what looked like a hopelessly formidable ice mass—chipping little piece, by piece, by piece.

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