

Friday, 7 April 2017

Subject: A letter from Moscow

Dear All:

Born and raised in the Cold War, it took me 67 years to visit Moscow for the first time, together with Silvia. Invited by Professor Alexey Portansky and the Higher School of Economics, I taught classes this week on the challenges of regulatory convergence, preferential trade, climate change and structural reform of the WTO. Students and attending government officials were interested and patient, and some of the topics seemed quite new to the audience. Climate change and trade is not an issue discussed, and I put an emphasis on the need of climate change communication.

Five years upon joining the WTO, trade policy in Russia is far from a high priority, given the political priorities of the Government. There is a feeling of disappointment as fruits are not reaped – except for access to an incredible amount of Western consumer goods dominating this town. Re-establishing Russian power projection of an Empire lost enjoys priority, much to the dismay of liberal academics we met and a former minister of economics over lunch. Instead of fostering cooperation with the EU and the US in a framework of industrial policy, the divide has been increasing ever since the struggle with Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and support of the Assad regime in Syria. Given the impending decline of oil consumption in the West, Russia is in need to develop its industrial and service sectors on export markets. No strategy, I am told, is in place to this effect. Russia has a long way to go. Things may need to get worse before economics and international trade become a priority. The protests of the youth may be a beginning, imploring corruption and cronyism.

Little of these shortcomings can be felt in the busy streets and prospects of the Russian capital of more than 11 million people – the largest town in Europe. Arriving from one of the four airports, and traveling along broad but constantly congested roads, you pass hundreds of huge flats with housing becoming more expensive and often unaffordable as you reach the city centre. The centre of the city is amazingly clean with remarkable buildings and squares quite apart from the Kremlin and Red Square, flanked by GUM, a symbol of Russian capitalism and modern inequality, next to an excessive amount of black Mercedes and BMWs on busy streets and aggressive traffic. Yet, in its neighbourhoods you also find cosy restaurant with lively young people, and walking down the pedestrian zone of Arbat outside the tourist season invokes a lively city life and folks busy with iPhones as elsewhere around the globe.

The Metro stations are most impressive, both for their size and space left to people to travel. You do not feel at all in a tub. Rather, the stations are centres of art and culture deploying history and a common identity. I shall not forget watching people with all different complexions traveling on the stairs up or down, composed, dignified, but hardly ever smiling. You bow your head before the people who lost 40 million humans in fighting Nazism also for us, whatever the failures of communism.

Perhaps the best part of this trip with Silvia were discussions and conversations with professors and our guide, Ms Veronika Charugina a student in history. She showed us around in a town where we neither read or speak the language, and yet we felt the common European cultural heritage and linkages, visiting the graves of the cellist Rostropovich, the composer Sostakovich, of the writer Bulgakov, next to the Soviet and Russian Republic elite buried in a strange and packed cemetery. We visited the Bolschoi Ballet and enjoyed very much its creative perfection and classical traditions. The Tretjakow Museum is most impressive with its beautiful spiritual icons and a 19th Century paintings yet little know in Western Europe.

The revival of religion – next to consumerism – is a remarkable trait in modern Russia – the epitome being the newly reconstructed Cathedral of the Saviour, the main church (where Pussy Riots took the courage to perform and provoke). It was only built in 1920, completely destroyed in 1931 and rebuilt as an exact replica few years ago. You would not see the difference, and the question remains what kind of society would address the future this way as shows by the 21st Century sky scrapers of the financial district.

We return from this trip reinforced that dialogue on the basis of a common cultural heritage is essential in light of widely shared problems (including combatting climate change, IS and terrorism virulent this week in St Petersburg), and that in human interaction, the cosmopolitan theory proves right: Where ever and who we are, essential human problems of life and interaction are shared and provide the basis of understanding and friendship among individual human beings. This is where I hope you and the WTI will continue to make a difference.

Have a good week-end,

Thomas