

Impressions from a study stay in St. Petersburg July-August 2019

I spent 5 weeks in St. Petersburg from July 8. till August 15. 2019 studying Russian language at the State Pedagogical University Gerzen in S. Petersburg. In this report I describe my general and personal impressions.

1. The town, the region and the country

For the incoming tourists is the visa and custom clearance done in a business like and efficient way without long waiting time. On the other side the Russians often complain about extended bureaucracy in their country. There is a convenient bus and subway **transport** from the airport Pulkovo to the center. The extended subway network is the main transport means, the intervals between trains in rush hour are about 1 min.

The first impression in the city are the well dressed rushing **people** on the sidewalks and slowly walking tourists, mostly from China, with their cameras and i-phones. In the streets drive middle-to-high class cars of European and Asian provenance with high speed, faster are only motorcycles as if there was no speed limit. There are no bike riders. **Security** is ensured everywhere in town by day and night. Various security officials are visible everywhere; theatres, subway, stadium and big department stores can be entered after security check only.

In the town center many **buildings** from the 19th century have undergone renovation, several still wait for it. On the periphery are many large housing estates from the Soviet time and numerous housing estates are being built in the outskirts. However no large independent satellite cities exist in the surrounding Leningradskaya Oblast – I suppose the reason is missing transportation network system like e.g. the S-Bahn in Switzerland and Germany and of course the planning premisses. In the countryside are some one-family houses, but no construction activity in this sector is visible. What struck me right away is the lack of sport facilities and play grounds for the public in town, existing and extended green parks can not be a substitute.

The **development of economy** is a long-standing subject-matter of people, media and politicians. The people often complain about corruption and low pensions and salaries - the range is between 40'000 – 100'000 rubles. This is not much if the 1-3 room apartments cost between 1,5 to 8 million rubles and the interest rates for mortgages are above 6 %. Possible solution for young couples could be something like DINKS: 'Double income and no kids' which seems to be practiced and the birthrate remains as a consequence very low.

The general objective – to reduce the dependency on oil, gas and raw materials and to develop a competitive industrial **production**, chemical, agricultural industry and financial services - still lacks the momentum and sustainable results. According to the economy journal 'Expert' the major concerns are export capable industries, stable exchange rate of ruble, low inflation (now about 4,5 %) and low credit interest rates (now about 7,5 %). The GDP growth rate is falling from 2,8 % in 2018 to 1,2 % in 2019 due to weak export and low domestic demand which is not a good sign for betterment. China has to some degree compensated for the sanction induced shortfalls. The Russia-Belarus relationship is being intensified, not much heard about Eurasian Economic Union. Major task of St. Petersburg Int. Economic Forum held in June was to find foreign investors. Notwithstanding that does the Federal Government **support** distant regions with substantial financial assistance for the development and maintenance of infrastructure, e.g. 19 billion R for Krim, 17 billion R for Sachalin and so on (see Izvestia, Rossiskaya Gazeta). The city administration of SP with mayor A. Beglov has launched many programmes to improve the infrastructure like hospitals, transportation (subway) and housing services.

Enduring problem are the **catastrophes** like the forest fires in Siberia which affect 15 millions hectares every year! Recently occurred floods in Siberia and Far East affecting thousands of people

and hectares of land. In both catastrophes the Federal Government was quickly on site with financial help for suffering population and with technical assistance for the regions, including army units, airplanes, machines, fire brigades, construction firms and workers etc. When the smog clouds reached US coast president D. Trump offered help.

Last weekend in July is bound for celebration of the ‚**Day of Navy**‘ which was founded by Peter I in 1696. In the river Neva were parading various military vessels of the type frigates, cruisers, mine seekers and patrol boats. Finally flew Navy and Air Force airplanes like MIG, Sukhoy and Tupolev over the town. Many thousands people watched the parade from the long embankments of the Neva. President W. Putin and military leaders were on the tribune at the Admiralty building. The Army displayed new weapon systems like tanks and artillery rockets on the main square at the Winter Palace. After the parade there was a light entertainment programme for the general public on square between the Ermitage and General Staff building.

The **religion** plays an important part in the life of the Russians. After the end of the Soviet Union many closed churches and monasteries were reopened and restored. The Nevsky Prospect sees churches of all major religions and are always full: Orthodox, Armenian, Roman Catholic, Lutheran etc. The major orthodox cathedrals are the Kazansky and Izakievsky Sobor. The historical city was built after 1703 in three centuries by Italian, French and Russian architects. The new Russian engineers have succeeded in building recently outstanding roads, bridges, buildings (Gasprom) and football stadium for the ‚Zenit‘ team.

The **weather** was typical for the region: partly cloudy and sunny, temperatures around 20 degrees and frequent rain showers. The residents told us that they have only three seasons: Winter, spring and fall. A special experience are the long days and short ‚white nights‘ with complete darkness from midnight till 3 a.m. only.

Petersburg would not be Petersburg without its **culture**. All theatres, opera houses and music halls are open and play for all residents and tourists. Needless to say that the works of Russian classical composers dominate the programme – absolute runner is Tchaikovsky’s ‚Swan Lake‘ either in Andrejevskii or Mariinskii Theatre. On the streets various singers and rock bands play for the entertainment of pedestrians.

2. Studying Russian Language in St. Petersburg

All state universities in St. Petersburg **offer summer language courses** on all levels for foreign students. For the student visa is required an invitation-confirmation letter of the University in S.P. After the arrival a short assessment test takes place and the teaching can begin in small classes of 6 to max. 12 students who come from China, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, France, Bulgaria, Poland etc. It is a face-to-face teaching covering grammar, literature, history, speaking practice and writing. Swiss universities offer this possibility to about 20 students every year.

For my C1-C2 class I have prepared and performed a **Project Management 50'** presentation based on Russian business books. I invested into it 40 hours of work and about 6'000,- R (ca. 100 Fr.). I received good feedbacks and will translate the presented material into German and English for presentations elsewhere. It was a rather new subject for the Philologic Faculty, interest in this and in a general management lecture showed the Economic Faculty. For the preparation of my lecture I bought a used i-7 Lenovo Notebook in an electronics store, however after this several contacts about the solution of minor technical problems followed.

Beside the university communication with local residents is advisable. This is possible in various institutions or clubs. The Business Center in Kazanskaya Street 7 offers many possibilities and is a very useful **meeting point** and center for contacts, events, expositions and hospitality. Many young people from Russia, expats and tourists meet there almost every evening in different groups and discuss various topics in Russian, English, French, Italian enjoying friendly atmosphere in

spacious rooms and drinks and snacks of any kind. In the framework of these activities I have made for the visitors a presentation of my photographs from and about Switzerland.

A useful link could be the **JCI Russia** in SPB (Junior Chamber International), but it is difficult to establish a direct contact to them, the active link is <https://vk.com/jcispb>. The JCI is a worldwide organization of young people, also active in Switzerland, see www.jci.ch

A visit and stay in S. Petersburg is unimaginable without the visit of some of the famous **museums**: Ermitage, Russian Museum, Museums of the Religion, Artillery, Navy, Blockade etc. etc. The Ermitage museum complex consists of 1'100 rooms and about 90'000 exposed objects. In the afternoons a crowd of visitors moves body-on-body through the exposition rooms. The other museums offer more space and time for individual visit.

There are very important historical sites in the **neighborhood** of St. Petersburg. It is on one side the Navy harbour city Kronstadt and the city Wyborg near the Finnish border. The czars have built in the countryside their summer residences – richly furnished palaces in beautiful parks: Pushkin-Czarskoe Selo, Peterhof, Pavlovsk, Oranienbaum and Gatchina. They were heavily damaged during occupation by the German Wehrmacht in WW2 and in the 900 days lasting blockade of the city St. Petersburg from Sept. 1941 till Jan. 1944. This was a traumatic experience for all survivors followed by extensive and expensive restoration work after the war. The museum and palace interiors (pictures, carpets, dinnerware, jewellery etc.) were transferred to safety in Siberia before the war.

3. Conclusions

A study stay in St. Petersburg offers a unique opportunity for learning a lot about an exceptional town. The visitor can discover its architectural, artistic and cultural treasures and for establish contacts with some local residents. It is not an exaggeration to call St. Petersburg the 'Northern Venice' or as the Russians do 'Northern Capital'. I can recommend the visit of the city of St. Petersburg to any student and tourist – if you do not travel in winter.

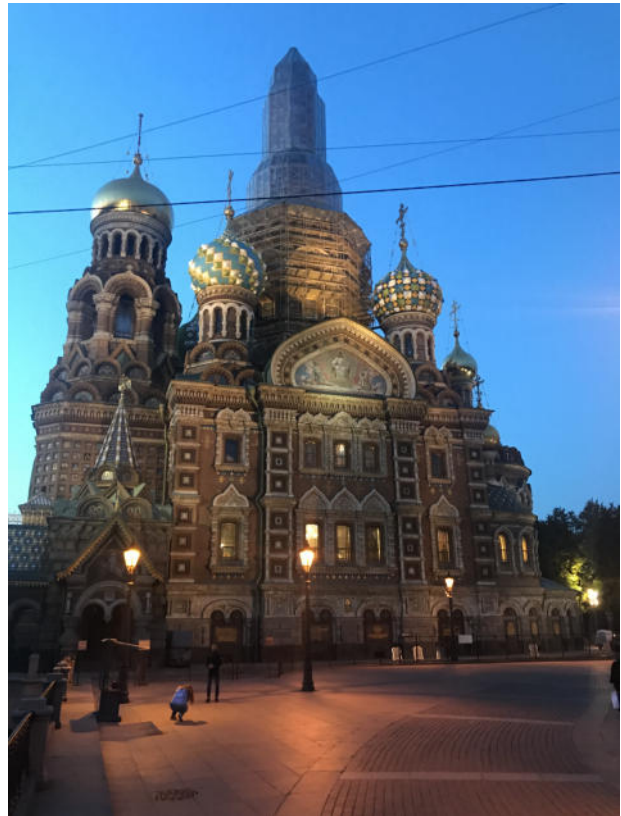
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20. August 2019

Author, St. Petersburg, 28. July 2019



Author, St. Petersburg, 6. August 2019



Copy of roman statue, St. Petersburg, July 2019

Church off he Spilled blood, St. Petersburg



Football Stadium, St. Petersburg, 3. August 2019



Navy parade, St. Petersburg, 28. July 2019