

Report on experiences abroad

Study semester at the “Higher School of Economics”, Moscow, Russia

**Summer term 2005
(March – July 2005)**

By Nicole Petrick

- **Idea**

The idea of spending one semester in Russia developed already a long time ago. Already in school, I studied the Russian language next to English and French and since then had the goal of never neglecting the one or the other. The Russian language though always gave me a harder time than any other – especially its grammar (6 cases and the aspects).

Taking this as a challenge, I decided to go abroad in order to study and live in Russia.

- **Planning / Preparations**

Choice of University and period of study

My home university, the Humboldt-University of Berlin, has various contracts with Russian state universities in Moscow, where all known universities are among. Thus, also the State University - Higher School of Economics (SU-HSE, short HSE) is one of the partner universities, which also operates an international masters program in the fields of economics, finance and management with the Faculty of Economics of the Humboldt-University of Berlin. The decision of studying at the HSE was made due to the fact that this university just was founded twelve years ago and is thus a very modern university, especially emphasizing internationality. Additionally, its Faculty of Economics has an excellent reputation within and out of Russia and enjoys the extra bonus of being situated right in the centre of Moscow.

As for the period of study, the boundaries of time were set to one semester only, since I believe it to be efficient enough as well as due to the fact that I am planning to spend a second semester in France.

Situation in Moscow

- **Language**

The ultimate need for a survival in Russia is the knowledge of the Russian language, even in a city like Moscow. Almost nobody speaks English on the streets and even at an international university as the HSE there are almost no courses taught in English.

Who plans to study in Russia, has to already have a good knowledge of the basics of the Russian language as to being able to read and write Cyrillic in hand- and print writing as well as having broader knowledge on vocabulary.

- **Life**

Life in Moscow is equivalent to that in a typical big city. For the reason of me coming to Moscow from Berlin, I did not have many difficulties while of adjusting. The things, those are most likely to become visible and annoying in short:

Moscow has officially 12 and unofficially 14 million inhabitants, not counting the thousands of commuters that stream in and out of town daily. The masses of people on the streets and especially in the metro, in particular within the rush hours (9-10 a.m. and 6-7 p.m.), might become a burden.

Summarizing, the city is noisy, hectic and dirty (compared to German cities) and who does not come from a big city, should not get depressed by it.

People live in Moscow in large living houses and quarters. The average life standard is below the German one.

I can not give any advise on student accommodations, since Russian students themselves commented on avoiding them – what I did. If they are as bad as their reputation, I consequently can not say. However, I also did not know one foreign student, who lived in a dormitory for a longer period of time.

Who wants to look for an own apartment, should expect prices to be way above the German average price level. It is possible to pay \$1000 for a 60m²-apartment, even though prices vary a lot with location. Apartments on Tverskaya ulitsa, for example, can cost up to \$5000 a month. Apartments generally come furnished though.

Public transport belongs to the cheapest things in Moscow. Who possesses a student ID of a Russian university, can receive a student ticket at the Moscow Metro and is then able to ride the metro for a price of 116 Rubles (€3,30; August 05) for a month, starting on each first day of the month.

Generally it can be said, that prices for food and other necessities belonging to the daily need are cheaper or at the same price available as in Germany. Furthermore, calling within Moscow via home phone is for free and using mobile phones is also below the German prices. Any thing that is not considered to be an every day need, such as going to restaurants, bars, clubs and cafés is combined with prices, which are sometimes way more expensive than for instance in the German capital.

- **Mentality of Muscovites**

With the political changes in Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, the population changed a lot. While some turned out to be the winners of the changes, many of the people now belong to their losers. Counting two devaluations of currency, most elderly people lost all of their savings, thus causing many old people to live in poverty.

The current winners are the “newly rich” Russians, out of which the once with most influence are called “oligarchs” by the people. This negative meant expression is supposed to show that probably none of those people ever gained all their money by means of pure honesty and fairness, at least nobody believes it to be this way. Additionally, oligarchs are said to be trying to achieve power in politics with the help of their hard currencies.

The majority of Russians is situated between the two extremes and tries to get along as well as possible.

Those people present themselves as warm-hearted and open-minded people, also towards foreigners from the west. (Next to anti-Semitism, xenophobia towards dark-skinned people, too, has not vanished yet).

Generally it can be said, that Russians in Moscow are, if at all, especially cold and unfriendly on the streets. If one is able to get to know them better, they turn out to be very hospitable, helpful and reliable.

- **Institute**

The Higher School of Economics consists of multiple faculties, e.g. the faculty of Economy, Management, Politology and others. Sometimes the impression appears that the faculties do little if at all coordinate each other or among each other; equivalently they are located separately all over town. Since I came to the HSE via the Faculty of Economics of the Humboldt-University of Berlin, my main faculty at the HSE was also the one of Economics. I also chose some courses at the Faculty of Politology, which is generally possible. However, when I tried to get the certificates of passing the courses, I was told that my main faculty was the one of Economics and thus no contract was made with the Faculty of Politology and this now being the reason of not being able to handing me any certificate. As always, there is a bureaucratic way out of the problem, meaning that one faculty sends the other a contract.

One should consider this fact in order to avoid trouble shortly before examinations start.

Students studying within the Masters program, meaning those participating in courses of the first or second year “Magistratura” should know that most Russian students already work next to university. Thus, at some faculties many courses start in the evening and many students belong to the very busy ones, which hardly find any free time between job and study.

Negative for me was, that no courses of the Russian language were offered for foreign students. The only possibility is to look for a private teacher. Moreover, one can go to other universities and participate in language courses there. However, this is not for free and fees up to \$200 per month have to be paid. Additionally, it is very complicated to gather information when already in Moscow. Since most universities do have their sites in the internet, it is of advantage to retrieve information on language courses already in advance.

- **Bureaucracy**

The most annoying topic at last – Russian bureaucracy.

Everybody travelling to Russia and thus already in the possession of a visa has to get registered within three working days.

For this an entry and exit form has to be filled in by the time of the arrival. While the entry card is taken when entering the country, the exit card has to be kept until leaving it, since it is this card where the registration will be stamped on (as also in the passport).

The registration can only be ordered by the person or organisation who also sent the invitation (thus generally the university). The HSE has a whole department coping with this and is thus helping foreign students a lot. One gets information on what formularies are still missing and what needs to be filled out in order to finally become a legal resident of Moscow.

Some more words to the visa:

Generally, as also done by the HSE, one receives a first invitation for the period of three months that allows the reception of an equally timed visa for a single entry and exit. At the end of the three months an application for a multi visa, which will be organized via the university in Moscow and will be given from the responsible Russian authority, can be handed in.

Within these first three months one consequently enjoys a quite restrictive freedom of travel. As far as I know, in case of an emergency it is possible to apply for an exit and re-entry without an invalidation of the visa via the university. However, this application has to be given in advance of time. Real freedom of travel will come back, when the multi-visa is valid.

- **Return**

Due to the fact that my university has a contract with the HSE and also operates a study program, I do not believe that I should face any trouble trying to get my courses accepted.

Generally, I suggest talking with the home university already in advance about the courses that are offered at the HSE and what courses should be taken, in order to avoid any trouble afterwards. The HSE presents its course plans and schedules on the internet for each upcoming semester. Since the system does not change, the use of the equivalent schedules

and plans from the year before is also possible. All courses are counted on behalf of the ECTS-System, making a valuation of the needed credits easy. As for the return to the home university, I suggest preparing a certified translation of the given Russian transcripts while still being in Russia.

- **Summary**

I do not want to miss the time spent in Moscow. I learned, experienced and saw a lot. Many impressions and experiences had influences on the way I think today. I made a further progress in my own development and got to know a culture that rather stays unknown for most people.

Who lived in Russia for a longer time, will recognize, what one misses from his home country but also what one misses in his home country.

“It is harder to live in Russia than in Germany, because sometimes elementary things in life are missing, thus making every day life more difficult. However, it is easier to live in Russia than in Germany, because the mentality of the people makes living together easier.”