

Understand Moscow

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The Russian capital has a new mayor at the helm, a newly prosperous middle class and a new look to boot.

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Nearly 900 years of history, from medieval magic to imperial grandeur, from communist austerity to contemporary affluence.

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Icons and onion domes, sculptures and skyscrapers: the Russian capital is something to see.

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Moscow Today

Twenty years into its reign as the capital of the new Russian Federation, Moscow has proven itself. In this short time the city has weathered economic crises and political transitions, building sprees and demolition derbies, terrorist attacks and festive celebrations. Now – with a new mayor at its helm, a newly prosperous middle class and a new look to boot – the city has settled into an upbeat but sustainable rhythm. What Stalin said is finally true: ‘Life has become better, comrades. Life has become more joyous.’

Best on Film

Little Vera (1989) A ground-breaking film that caused a sensation with its frank portrayal of a family in chaos.

Farewell (2010) A real-life Cold War-era political thriller with a French twist.

Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears (1980) Great chick flick that bagged an Oscar for best foreign language film.

My Perestroika (2010) An insightful documentary about coming of age during the *perestroika* era and navigating life in contemporary Moscow.

Best in Print

The Master and Margarita (Mikhail Bulgakov) The most telling fiction to come out of the Soviet Union.

On the Golden Porch (Tatyana Tolstaya) Short stories focusing on big souls in little flats in the 1990s.

Anna Karenina (Leo Tolstoy) A legitimate alternative for readers who don't have time for *War and Peace*.

Children of the Arbat (Anatoly Rybakov) A tragic but vivid portrait of 1930s Russia.

Politics

In September 2010, long-time Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov lost his job. After 18 years, he was fired by President Medvedev, who issued a formal decree on the matter. The new boss is Sergey Sobyenin, hand-picked by the president in tandem with Prime Minister Putin.

Sobyenin was a surprising choice, as he hails from the Siberian province of Tyumen, although he had previously been working in Moscow as the Head of the Presidential Administration. Analysts theorise that his ‘outsider’ status and his clean reputation made him an attractive and inoffensive candidate.

Sobyenin's early initiatives have included a crack-down on corruption and a slow-down of construction, both of which were welcomed by many Moscow residents. He also promised to address the city's massive traffic problems.

One year down the line, critics are questioning his effectiveness. His early talk was tough, but preservationists wonder if the new mayor has the power to enforce his policies. The *Moscow Times* quoted one sceptical analyst: ‘There are always politicians who like to fight corruption, but it's unlikely that Sobyenin will get rid of it in Moscow. It never works this way.’

Terrorism

Terror continues to rock the Russian capital. The most recent episode (at the time of research) was the January 2011 bomb that exploded in the baggage-claim area at Domodedovo International Airport, killing 37 people. This is just one in a growing list of horrific incidents that remind Muscovites that the conflict in Chechnya is not resolved.

Meanwhile, Chechens and other peoples from the Caucasus claim that they endure increased harassment, both officially and unofficially. They complain of