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What happened to Moscow? A dispatch from behind the sanctions

Three years after the West wielded historic punitive measures, the Russian capital moves to a different rhythm — altered, adapted, but far from collapsed.

It's now June 2025, more than three years since the West imposed what was billed as the harshest sanctions regime in modern memory. And yet, strolling through Moscow today, you'd struggle to find much evidence of siege. The metro still glides under the city, smooth, spotless, and absurdly cheap.

Cranes peck away at the skyline. Cafes are busy even on a Monday night.

None of which is to say the Russian capital hasn't changed. It has—in small ways, and some not so small. It still feels unmistakably European. But it's a Europe outside the EU, orbiting on its own track.

A lot of famous names are gone. No McDonald's, no IKEA, no Zara. In their place, Russian versions, Chinese entrants, and homegrown upstarts that mimic the aesthetic, if not the price point. Yet Burger King still grills away, and KFC has become Rostic's again. Starbucks lives on in everything but name as Stars Coffee. Capitalism didn't leave. It changed its clothes.

On the high street, Turkish and Chinese brands have filled the gaps. Many Western luxury names still linger—Lacoste, Armani, Saint Laurent—but these days they share space with labels few outsiders would recognise. Luxury perfumes are easy to find. iPhones too. In fact, they're sometimes cheaper here than in the EU.

Nightlife, once among the continent's most electric, has changed. The once visible LGBT scene has largely vanished. Even the legendary Propaganda nightclub has shut. But the lights

remain on—Simach still rocks and rapper Timati's Flava is the place to be seen. With suitably absurd prices to boot.

The pubs are busy. Guinness is a luxury at 950 rubles (\$12), so people drink local stouts like St Petersburg's Black Sheep instead, at less than half the price. Barmen report take home earnings of around 150,000 rubles a month with tips. That's about \$1,800, and in Moscow, it goes surprisingly far. Rent is still modest, and a single metro ticket costs \$0.85. Unlimited monthly travel is \$40. Three times cheaper than in Berlin.

Restaurants remain lively. But signs of strain are there. Birds, once a flashy Moscow City skyscraper favourite, has closed. So too has the legendary Williams in Patriki. Chefs grumble about inflation, but the kitchen staff still show up, and wages are rising. Unlike in much of Europe, pay here hasn't stood still in recent years.

The real shift is human. The migrants and tourists are different. The Americans have gone. So have the Germans. Irish pubs that once echoed with the English language now host mostly Russians. On the streets you hear more Arabic, Persian, and Chinese. Moscow feels more Global South than Global West.

Cuisine tells the same story. A decade ago, decent Indian food was a rarity. Now it's everywhere—upmarket on Tverskaya, or downmarket in the suburbs. Not just for expats. Russians eat there too, curious and increasingly cosmopolitan in their tastes.

Politics? Hardly a whisper. Summers used to bring protests around Trubnaya. Often attended by more Western journalists than actual Russians. Now, silence. The liberal opposition is either muted, abroad, or fearful to show its head. The political void isn't heavy with menace. It just feels absent. Moscow keeps moving, with or without the drama.

Football, once a cultural anchor, has drifted too. This year's Champions League final came and went with barely a murmur. Match TV no longer shows it. You can find a stream online, but it's not an event anymore. Hard to believe the World Cup final was played here just seven years ago.

The Ukraine conflict is present, but not prominent. You see the uniforms, the occasional recruitment poster. And sometimes, a stranger leans in and asks what you think of the "special military operation." But there's no rationing. No gloom. Construction crews keep pouring concrete. Shops stay stocked. Streets stay swept.

The cars have changed. The Hyundais and Toyotas are thinning out. Mercedes and BMWs still pass by, though they're harder to come by. Now, it's BYD, Lixiang, Zeekr—badges of status from a different place.

The digital world reflects the city's new orientation. While Western media like CNN and The Guardian are not blocked and can still be accessed directly, others require a VPN. The same applies to Instagram, X and Youtube. This, however, comes with a shrug from most Muscovites. After all, it was the EU that first blocked Russian media for its own citizens, they remind you. In this new bifurcated world, reciprocal restrictions are just part of the game.

The departure of many liberals, both native and foreign—journalists, artists, and tech workers—has also left a cultural mark. Once fixtures of Moscow's cosmopolitan energy, many left for Berlin, Tbilisi, Istanbul, and further afield. In their absence, the city recalibrated. Few mourn the 'relocants' as they're derisively known. Among those who stayed, they're seen as quitters—self-important chumps who abandoned ship and now jeer from the shore. Meanwhile, a quiet trickle of returnees—particularly young men from that demographic—has begun to reappear. A few of the more privileged ones, discreetly, admit that life in Bali or Koh Samui wasn't quite what they'd hoped.

Tourism patterns have shifted too. Paris weekends and London shopping sprees are out. Now it's Dubai, Antalya, Bangkok. The destinations may be different, but the appetite to travel hasn't dimmed.

Moscow's mood, if it can be captured, is one of motion without anxiety. No triumph. No collapse. Just a city learning to walk a new path. A couple dances to a busker on Arbat. A policeman eats a shawarma near Leningrad Station. A barista at Stars Coffee hands you a cappuccino with the faintest smile.

Life ticks on. The sanctions were meant to isolate. Instead, they've underlined a truth: this city, with all its contradictions and churn, is going its own way. No fanfare, no hand-wringing, little introspection. Just work to do, money to make, bills to pay, dreams to chase—and plenty to bury.

To walk Moscow today is to encounter a capital that no longer seeks the West's approval—and may not miss its presence either.

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