



# Great expectations, greater disappointments

SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE  
BY ERIN FITZPATRICK

(Kaliningrad, Russia) — August 19th marked the six year anniversary of Gorbachev's arrest, and the official end of communist rule in Russia. However, in most towns across the country, no celebrations took place.

For some people, like Kolya Andreev, a computer programming student at Russia's Kaliningrad University and son of one of Russia's successful new entrepreneurs, it is simply "too early to be happy."

For others, said Lena Pretona, a literature student and daughter of a naval officer, "Life is worse now. Most people in my parent's generation would even like to see com-

munist return to Russia."

During Russia's 1996 presidential election, Democratic Party leader, Boris Yeltsen, tied Communist Party leader Genady Zugarov's vote 35 to 31 per cent. A second election was required before Yeltsin could be proclaimed president.

Many Russians are unhappy with their situation as a capitalist country. Capitalism hasn't brought the changes everyone expected it would.

"I guess we kind of thought we would be the United States in a week," said Andreev.

Pretona compares the situation to Leningrad during World War II.

"Do you see all of these starving people in the streets? During communism that was very, very

rare. And last spring, my family had no hot water, no gas, no electricity. When it was communism, you got gas if you paid for gas."

While there is an ample supply of gas in Russia, and in fact, of many other products which would never have been seen here during the communist regime, few people can afford to buy them.

Russians earn an average monthly wage of \$130 (US). Sadly, some people earn as little as \$13 (US). With inflation averaging around 50 per cent and peaking as high as 200 per cent, most suffer from relatively weak purchasing power.

"Foreign products that no one can afford — that's all it is, capitalism in Russia," said Pretona

Andreev agrees that Western style capitalism has not yet developed. "We've got some strange situation between communism and capitalism; I don't know what it is." But he

believes, Russia's new economic situation means more than just Western labels on store shelves, it

means opportunity.

"Everyone now has more possibilities. I believe really clever people can have anything they want...Before, you could not dream about your future because it was planned for you: You are an engineer, your whole life you will be an engineer. You will never be a chief."

Pretona is quick to counter that such certainty about the future is exactly what some people want.

"Now we have more freedom but less stability."

Ultimately Russia's decision to stay with capitalism or return to communism will depend on which of these concepts prevails in the upcoming years.

Stability is of more use to the older generation, who must survive on Russia's minimum monthly pension of \$25 (US). As a result most Russian pensioners have to find

supplementary income. It is not now unusual to see a 70 year-old woman cleaning out gutters. These people miss the pension they had under communism, which allowed them to live comfortably.

To which Andreev asks, "Why do people only remember the good things about communism? They are so stupid. These are the same people whose friends and relatives went to Stalin's prison camps. They were afraid to say anything, to do anything... They forgot how bad life was before."

Freedom, democracy, capitalism — these are abstract concepts in a country where concrete hardships are felt increasingly each day.

"It might have been a bad life under communism," said Pretona. "But at least it was life; Now it is only survival."

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