

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Beyond the villain movie star

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Alessandra Drigo analyses the Russian character and finds it more open than most Europeans she knows.

I left Russia in late January, but still it is everywhere in my everyday life and I could not be more grateful for the chance I had to learn what to live in Russia today means.

In the period where Russia is in the wave of breaking news, I find myself surrounded by comments and prejudices that often go beyond the pure news, so when I am asked to tell something about what I experienced in Russia, I am more than glad to answer. The fact is the following: when I arrived in Saint Petersburg, I didn't know exactly what to expect, the only image I had of that huge country was the one pictured in the movies, or in books, about rulers, lovers and spies acting surrounded by snow. I can say I had a more precise picture of the economic situation of Russia and CIS in general, since I am studying Economics, and it helped me in the understanding of the society in which I was trying to settle in. In order to satisfy my curiosity, being in class with Russian professors and classmates was not enough, so I decided to share an apartment with other three - very lovely - Russian girls. Saint Petersburg is such a young dynamic city that is almost impossible to get bored, young Russians do love culture and art very much, it was easy to discover and enjoy what the city has to offer. I was very surprised actually to find so many young people, in Nevsky you can breath the city spirit which is totally young, innovative, and energetic. This has been the very first surprising detail, then when I started to get in touch with this net of young people - becoming part of it - I discovered that our mindset was completely on the same line for almost all the topics, but sometimes, due to cultural backgrounds, my perception of facts was different from theirs. Not necessarily better or worse, but just different. This was another surprising detail: Russians in general are very talkative and curious about impressions and opinions, very interested in understanding things beneath the surface. For me, it was unbelievably interesting to notice these aspects, since before arriving there I thought things were just

the opposite. In class, different points of view were seen as precious, as a source of debate and consideration. Debating was a transversal and ordinary activity, professors always asked the audience some comments about lectures and I noticed Russian students are quite accustomed to argument and stand for their opinion, even more than I was. It has been very useful to take part to those debates and to measure my ideas with my Russian, German, Chinese, French, Dutch, Finnish, Spanish and Swiss colleagues. It deserves to be mentioned that most of the times we did not share the same conclusions at all, not even among Europeans, despite the approach to the topic was more or less the same. Nor in nor out of the classroom it has never happened that Russians wanted to shut down a conversation just because someone was presenting a different way of thinking, I have never ever felt closure towards any speech or topic. On the contrary, sometimes I perceived more closure from my European colleagues, sinning of know-it-all. Among the things I learned by living there, there is that the concept of State and politics are perceived very differently from what I was accustomed to. In everyday life there is a very thick line between people and politics, it is something especially elder Russians are not very interesting into, but they are all united in the deep love for their country. There is a brand new pride to be Russian across Saint Petersburg's wide boulevards.

The Russian culture generated some of the most extraordinary literature in the world, showing one of the deepest and finest ability of thinking and expression. Several scientific fields saw pioneers from Russian Federation, with its amazing scientists, mathematics and cosmonauts. The most famous ballets we can see performed on the stage in theatres worldwide have been written by the great musical sensitivity of Russian composers. But sometimes - maybe too many times - in recent years the aggressive Russian temperament, the ex-Kgb leader, the 'controlled democracy' narratives have become the lents of suspicion used to look at every discussion related to Russia, especially by media and social media. But the country is so much more than just those narratives. It seems to me that this way of approaching Russia has become part of a mental habit spread in western world, that precedes analysis on facts, numbers, circumstances, without the benefit of the doubt. This condition of prejudice, of which I used to suffer too, makes people forget that Russia is made of people, cultures, abilities that gave the world a lot of accomplishments that we still benefit from and we will benefit from in the future. Moreover, Russia has to face a condition that Europe and its countries have never faced: hugeness. Europeans sometimes sin in considering our notion of society as the example towards the different societies in the world needs to align sooner or later, despite the western one presents many criticality and hypocrisies. Russia owns some historical peculiarities that get lost in the centuries, starting from its dimension, which is a unique characteristic that needs to be taken into account in every discussion about culture and mindset. It is not easy

for us to imagine what does it mean to live in a country with eleven different time zones.

So, when I am asked to describe my experience in Russia, I invite the audience to forget about all the filters and Russian villains in movies, to take off the glasses of suspicion, and to move a step back from quick judgments. Only in that moment I start to tell the stories, to make people reflect on the points I wrote down here for you.

