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Notebook: Calm under Putin belies a Russia still seeking its identity

By Alison Smale

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KAZAN, Russia: This city of 1.1 million, the capital of Tatarstan and roughly halfway between Moscow and the Ural mountains that traditionally mark the eastern end of Europe, boasts a building whose provenance is rare, perhaps unique, on this continent.

The building is the Kul Sharif Mosque, a gleaming blue-and-white stone edifice opened in 2005 to mark the 1,000th anniversary of this intriguing city - and, one senses, to go some way to righting various wrongs meted out to the Muslim Tatars since Ivan the Terrible and his troops captured Kazan and destroyed the original mosque in 1552.

That history, Kul Sharif's multiple minarets and their prominent position in the cityscape of Orthodox churches and government buildings in Kazan's imposing kremlin, would alone make the mosque special.

But what really stands out in a Europe and Russia that grapple daily with the integration of Muslims and Christians are the gifts the mosque contains: much from Turkey, red marble from Egypt, rugs from Iran, a huge, imposing chandelier from the Czechs.

Bringing Prague and Persia under one roof, as it were, seems to attest to the skill with which the leaders of Tatarstan have carved out a special niche within Russia for themselves and their republic.

Since 1992, when the Tatars were restive and threatening to pull away from Moscow completely, the president of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, and his colleagues have clearly negotiated to keep more than a slim share of the wealth derived from their (now dwindling) oil reserves, their industries and a favorable location astride transit routes that link Moscow and Siberia.

If President Vladimir Putin and his late predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, are criticized - particularly abroad - for the brutality of Russian actions in Muslim Chechnya, Tatarstan suggests not just a different history, but greater diplomatic dexterity.

During a recent weekend, Kazan hosted hundreds of foreign visitors for the annual conference of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the London-based organization set up to help bring capitalism to the former Soviet bloc.

These were days that brought out all the contradictions of Putin's Russia, the jerky nature of its progress from Stalinism into a 21st century where its vastness and its energy resources guarantee importance, while the exact political complexion is not yet clear.

To wander the streets of this proud city is to sense a place that, while beholden to some genuine traditions, is - like much of Russia as a whole - making up its history as it goes along, picking and choosing parts of the past while ignoring others, and weaving it all into a new narrative of present and future.

On the one hand, Kazan displays beautifully renovated buildings; on the other, the 108-year-old Hotel Kazan, clearly once an imposing lodging place, is crumbling into extinction on the main pedestrian street.

On the edge of the sprawling city, the Tatars have built a hippodrome, a gleaming, multistory pavilion and racetrack. This ultramodern structure sat uneasily with the entertainment, an enthusiastic display of marshaled hospitality by hundreds of costumed dancers and singers, worthy of the era of Leonid Brezhnev.

The current Russian leadership is sitting so comfortably on hundreds of billions of energy dollars that it can spend, and - as parliamentary and presidential elections approach - tangible investment in industry and infrastructure is promised.

German Gref, the economics minister who helps decide this program, represented Russia in Kazan. The laconic ease with which the Kremlin can bestow - or withhold - was on display when a woman from the economically deprived Russian Far East asked about distributing wealth.

"You like this hotel?" Gref replied, referring to the business center - a 21st century mishmash of gleaming marble, shopping mall, multiplex cinema and meeting rooms where the conference was held. "Let's agree: We'll build one in Khabarovsk, and one in Vladivostok!"

On a more serious note, Gref seemed at pains to assure - particularly foreigners - that the oil windfall would not be frittered away. "We want to put in place spending schemes that will be transparent," he said. "Transparency is the way to ensure efficiency."

Transparency is manifestly lacking in many of Russia's workings, as Yelena Panfilova, head of the Moscow office of Transparency International, the nongovernmental anti-corruption group, can attest.

She and I were in Kazan for a discussion, featuring six successful women, of the (small) role of women in business and government in Eastern Europe. We women had a grand time swapping experiences. The deputy prime minister of Tatarstan, a stylish, stalwart survivor named Zilya Vakeva, cited some female success stories in her region, noting that "each narrative begins the same way: 'I lost my job in the 1990s.' "

Indeed, across Eastern Europe, it was women who went to work just anywhere, or took on risky, unfamiliar small businesses just to keep their families fed, while the men either powered ahead to another life (and another bride) or, often, proved hopelessly at sea in the new economic realities.

The depth of the changes brought to daily life by the collapse of Communism is hard to convey from anywhere but here, on the ground, or, as our discussion title had it, "at the frontier."

There is something of the frontier mentality of the American West at work in Russia today, where people are making a determined thrust into an uncertain future.

Side by side goes an Alice-through-the-looking-glass feeling of running just to stay in place - conveyed at the EBRD conference by a French banker, Philippe Cisterne of Société Générale.

"We are convinced that this country is going to be stronger and stronger," Cisterne said.

And yet. Back under the Tsars, Société Générale operated Europe-Asia Bank, then the biggest foreign bank in Russia. Its last branch was forced to close in 1924, seven years after the Bolshevik Revolution.

So, Cisterne said, "my dream would be to go back to Square One" - to have Société Générale control half the foreign banking business, just as it did a century ago.