



## Travel notes by Gilbert Doctorow

**Wir sind erfreut und begeistert, dass der politische Analyst Gilbert Doctorow uns erlaubt hat, einen seiner wunderschönen Texte zu publizieren.**

*Peter Hanseler*

Fri 19 May 2023

### Introduction

World politics dominates our blog. It is also the case that geopolitical and geo-economic issues have been pushing almost all other topics into the background for many months.

Nevertheless, people continue to live, reorient themselves and try to come to terms with the new circumstances. Not only in Switzerland or Germany. In Russia, too, of course. In the West there is hardly anything to read about this normal life in Russia,

which is not only a pity. This silence about the mundanities of life, which bring people and countries closer together in the first place, make them acquaintances and thus break down barriers - precisely this silence has always been one of the perfidious political strategies for making conflicts "inevitable" for one's own population and mentally attuning the population at all levels to worse things to come.

Gilbert Doctorow is a Brussels-based political analyst who not only runs a multilingual blog - <https://gilbertdoctorow.com> - and speaks perfect Russian, but also visits Russia several times a year, living among the people there, in his apartment. So when he talks about life in Russia, he describes what he has experienced himself.

With Gilbert Doctorow's kind permission, we publish here one of his actual Petersburg life descriptions. So some of the information might surprise you, because it doesn't fit at all into the narratives that are supposed to completely alienate us from Russia.

## St Petersburg Travel Notes – Part One

*Trying to sanction the Russian economy is like trying to sweep back the incoming tide*

**Trying to sanction the Russian economy is like trying to sweep back the incoming tide**

It is just over a week since my arrival in St Petersburg from Belgium and I will now begin to deliver what I proposed in my announcement of publication plans before setting out on this trip, namely to share my impressions of daily life in Russia's "northern capital" in wartime.

Today's essay is the first of what will be several installments. Readers will find that I offer a very detailed and personal form of journalism. I write about what I see and hear around me. I seek to address the information hole about Russia today in Western media. The reading public gets only overarching generalizations in mainstream print and electronic media without the underlying facts. That those overarching generalizations tend to be vile propaganda is a separate issue.

Here I will provide the facts, big and small, and leave it to readers to draw their own overarching generalizations. My personal conclusion is set out in the subtitle above: "trying to sanction the Russian economy is like trying to sweep back the incoming tide."

To those who prefer less detail, I say just skim until you find what interests you most.

Several curious readers have asked me to report on how I traveled here, since they are thinking of making a visit to Russia. Accordingly I will open this essay with information about my trip from Brussels. I covered this question a year ago in my essays entitled "feet on the ground." But travel conditions have been changing all the time since, and it is appropriate to convey what options there are now for travel to Russia and what are the respective pluses and minuses of these solutions.

I will then explain what "here" means, i.e., where I live in Petersburg, who are my neighbors and sources of information in socio-economic terms. And I will close out today's installment with information about one area of consumer interest which I believe I pioneered three years ago: what is on sale in Russia's supermarkets and city farmers' markets. In future installments, I intend to talk about other consumer goods, Then there will be words about entertainment in the performing arts as well as other aspects of high culture for which this city is rightly famous.. Everything has been affected by the Western sanctions and I believe that readers will be interested to see how Russia has adapted to the changed circumstances in so many different domains.

\*\*\*\*\*

How did I get here?

I came into Russia this time and plan to leave exactly the same way as in my last trip, back in November-December 2022, by flight from Brussels to Helsinki and by bus onward to Petersburg the next day. Leaving, I plan to follow the same route in reverse.

This is a rather inexpensive solution. Flights to Helsinki from Brussels take just two and a half hours. This as close as you can get to Russia by airplane from Western Europe given the cancellation of all flights ever since the start of the Special Military Operation.

Last year I also used the alternative solution of flying to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia and proceeding by bus to Petersburg from there. But the Estonian officials are really quite nasty at the border crossings in both directions, so that ceased to be an acceptable solution.

By contrast, the Finns are business like and passing their frontier is not stressful. Indeed, the greater nuisance is at the Russian border crossing which is motivated not by any ill humor but by mindless bureaucratic procedures that cost you

precious time. Going east, only the Russians require travelers to take their luggage out of the bus and pass it through X-ray machines. Only Russia does a full search of each bus, supposedly to thwart drug traffickers, though they have sniffer dogs and could in theory pass the bus in 10 minutes rather than an hour.

Only Russia has two further inspections of your passport when leaving the passport control building: to see that the entry stamp has been properly applied! And then at the Russian border crossing there is the question of who is among your fellow travelers. If you are unlucky, one or more will be Ukrainians returning to Russia, possibly for transit to their home country. That can delay the crossing for more than an hour by itself until the Russian border guards decide either to release or, more likely, to detain the unfortunate Ukrainian(s) for an in depth security investigation that will require that they spend the night there.

The buses themselves, operated by two different Russian registered companies, are modern, well staffed and comfortable as comfortable can be given that the trip will take on average 7 – 8 hours. The on-board entertainment systems work, so that you can pass the time watching one or two recent or classic movies.

Up to present, the Russians were issuing visas only to family members of RF citizens and the Finns, like other EU states have been admitting into Finland only Russians who had similar reasons for traveling abroad, not tourism. Accordingly, nearly all passengers on these buses have been dual nationals carrying both EU and Russian passports. For this limited number of travelers, the six daily buses in each direction appear to have been sufficient. However, now that visa issuance by Russia to tourists is opening up, there may be more pressure on the available bus transport.

Of course, for visitors to Russia from overseas, who already face lengthy flights, it is far preferable to arrive directly by plane. The most widely used solutions are to fly in to Moscow via Istanbul, Qatar, Dubai and other United Arab Emirates transit airports. For travelers from Europe, the solutions via the Middle East roughly double the cost of travel compared to the Helsinki solution described above.

I close these remarks on travel to Russia with the reminder that no Western payment cards work here, nor can you easily pay in advance for accommodation before arrival due to the cut-off of Russia from the global financial system. This means that you have to carry sufficient cash in dollars or euros to cover the costs of your stay. These currencies are freely exchanged for rubles in all banks and the exchange rate presently is very favorable to foreign visitors.

\*\*\*\*

Now, I should say a word about my home base in an outlying borough of Petersburg, which, together with day visits to the city center, provides the basis for my observations of 'life on the ground.'

"Pushkin" is the post-Revolutionary name of what was Tsarskoye Selo (Tsar's Village), the principal summer residence of Russia's rulers from the time of Peter the Great's daughter Empress Elizabeth Petrovna up to Nicholas II. From the last quarter of the 19th century, their secondary summer residence was in the Crimea.

We live in a middle class residential complex of about 200 apartments. The buildings are all no higher than 5 stories and there is plenty of green space around them where staff cares for flower beds and decorative shrubs. More to the point, we are located just across the road from the Catherine Palace, which is not only one of St Petersburg's prime tourist attractions, but also has an extensive park of 300 hectares where you can jog in splendid isolation early in the morning and where local ladies walk their baby prams later in the day. From 7am to 9am, entrance to the park is free.

In a later installment, I will explain what draws Russian and foreign visitors to this Palace, built in the middle of the 18th century in the Baroque style by Empress Elizabeth and her favored architect, the Italian Francesco Rastrelli. I have to admit, somewhat sheepishly, that in the eight years we have lived opposite that Palace, I only took the tour of its interiors yesterday. But that is a story for another day.

Our apartment block was built to the latest European standards 10 years ago by a Turkish construction firm and remains very comfortable and well maintained. Most of the tenants are young families and they know why they are here. Excellent schools are within 10 minutes walking distance, as are hospitals and clinics. For those with cars, and that is the majority of tenants, the underground parking below the residential buildings is a rare benefit in this town.

Though our complex is a 'gated community' in the strict sense of the word, residents are middle income, not plutocrats and there are no impoverished neighbors to keep out. The average purchase price of housing in this complex is about 2500 euros per square meter at current exchange rates. Since the ruble is now valued well below its true worth, it would be better to say that the long-term price is 3500 euros per meter, which is exactly in line with similar quality housing in Brussels.

A lot of the surrounding apartment buildings are occupied by the families of military officers. There are military schools here, which is nothing new: in tsarist times the prestigious Cadet Corps studied here. Indeed, one street nearby is named

"Kadetskaya." This is not to say that times do not change: a fair number of black and oriental students from the Global South also study here and shop in the same supermarkets as we do.

In other parts of Pushkin, especially at the periphery, there are self-standing single family homes. Though Pushkin is overall a low density town, the visual feel is urban, not suburban. We have a well developed network of surface public transport. Indeed, one change since my last visit was the replacement of the entire local bus fleet by new, smart looking Volga-branded buses. In keeping with the move to cashless commerce, the drivers no longer sell tickets and trips are paid for only by bank cards using the contactless terminals on board.

Urban as the infrastructure may be, people here are more sociable than in the Petersburg city center. Most everyone in our complex will greet you on the street with 'good morning' or 'good day.' People are orderly. We have no litter, nor is there a hint of graffiti anywhere.

I mention who our neighbors are not because they are a direct source of my information about the public mood. Beyond the simple politesse of greetings, we do not enter into discussions. But there are intermediaries who serve my purposes: the taxi drivers, the hair dressers – they all chat with my neighbors and they all chat with me. Otherwise my sources of information are our friends, who all live in downtown Petersburg. They are mostly people attached to the music world, meaning they went through formal training in music, have relatives performing in the Mariinsky Theater or otherwise on stage, or are themselves stage directors of opera. Then there is also the long time friend who at age 80 remains at the helm of one of the leading children's music schools in the city. A few other friends or close acquaintances are authors or publishers. I think it is worth mentioning this closeness to people in the arts because here in Russia as most everywhere else, such people are not knee-jerk patriots, so I particularly value their inputs for gauging the popular mood.

\*\*\*\*\*

I can say without hesitation that in Pushkin, just as in the Petersburg city center, it is a great pleasure to go shopping for food. We have three different supermarket chains present within 5 minutes walk from our apartment, all in the Economy to Medium Price categories, and a fourth supermarket 10 minutes walk away, "Perekyostok," which is in premium class. They each have their own suppliers as regards fresh produce, dairy, meats and fish, so that the products on offer vary and we are spoiled for choice. From time to time I visit the city market 3 kilometers away and find there still more delicacies for a fatter wallet.

Compared to what I saw on my last visit in December 2022, the product assortment of domestically prepared foodstuffs **has expanded considerably**, with many new entries on the market representing traditional Russian food items that go back to the 19th century and have not been seen on Russian store shelves since then. I think, for example, of tinned chunks of exotically named river fish from Siberia. Or jars of preserves of lingonberries or other red berries that have been mainstays of country life. Most everyone here remembers them from visits to grandma's dacha. Then there are jars of mixed wild mushrooms from European Russia in light vinegar and herbal marinade, Like the berries, they make a splendid side dish to meat and poultry main dishes. On the other hand, cloudberry preserves have disappeared from the market. These berries are treasured in Finland, where local producers relied on raw fruit imported from the marshes of (since WWII) Russian Karelia. The finished preserves were reintroduced as a luxury product category in Russia by Ikea. But with Ikea's pull-out from the Russian market last year, the cloudberry preserves disappeared with them. Perhaps some enterprising Russians will step in and fill that gap.

For more extravagant traditional Russian culinary treats, namely big game from the North, foodies can visit the city's finest food emporium, Azbuka Vkusa (Alphabet of Taste) in the shopping center opposite the Moscow railway station. There you will find tins of elk, bear and other rare trophy animals. I assume that the target audience for such treats was visiting or resident foreigners, though there are surely enough super wealthy Petersburgers to justify keeping these goods in stock. Those same wealthy folk visiting Azbuka Vkusa can find at the fish counter other curiosities that will make a party for the most demanding and pampered guests.

Azbuka Vkusa are still offering the exceptional seafood that I saw here a year ago. These include enormous oysters from the Russian Far East and from Crimea and also a tank displaying a live 2 or 3 kg King Crab from the Far East that will probably cost a couple of hundred euros. But what I found when I stopped by the store last week was new: a tank with live sterlets. The starlet (стерлядь in Russian) is a small member of the sturgeon family that was found in most European and UK rivers until the Industrial Age pollution mostly killed them off. However, back in the 1980s they were still caught wild in the Danube. I recall that on my frequent visits to Belgrade in those years I would on occasion buy a small open tin packet of black sterlet caviar. It was being sold at a fancy price to the diplomatic community. Taking it back to Belgium gave us reason for calling in friends to a dinner party. By the way, 50 gram jars of pasteurized sterlet caviar have just now appeared in Russian premium range supermarkets priced at 3,000 rubles (35 euros). This is not

to be confused with the beluga sturgeon raised in France, in Italy and elsewhere that is promoted in Belgium ahead of New Years and, from my experience, was tasteless.

Still on the subject of live sterlets, the price in Azbuka Vkusa last week was 1450 rubles per kilogram, meaning about 18 euros. That is the same price as in the Petersburg city markets two years ago and it is the same price as ordinary salmon steaks when they are offered on discount in Belgium, reduced from the normal 28 euros or more. The sterlet can be the centerpiece of any dinner party. You stuff it with purple basilica and other herbs from the Caucasus mountains, you roll it in flat bread and bake it to perfection. These fish are farmed in the Lower Volga River not far from the Caspian Sea.

Coming back down to earth from those heights of gastronomy just described, I note that some new foodstuffs in local supermarkets replace and consciously make reference to products that were supplied from abroad but are now locally produced by Russian start-ups. In the latter regard I think of the 100 gram jars of what is called *pâté à la française* (in Latin letters) made from duck or other poultry. A further note on the label identifies the product as " рьет ," which is the transliteration of the French "rillettes" which differ from other spreads in that they have very low fat content and consist mainly of filet meat not liver. The presence of such products in Economy class food stores here tells you something about the sophistication of Russian culinary tastes and what folks picked up from travel abroad beginning in the mid 1990s.

I have tried these rillettes and they are excellent. However, not all attempts at local substitution are so successful. Cheeses are still a work in progress. Beware of Russian produced "camembert" and blue cheese. For those with deep pockets, the French originals remain available in the supermarkets here but the prices are painful. Meanwhile, less prestigious cheeses like Maasdam, sliced and portion packed or Greek Feta in little Tetrapak containers are widely sold and are no more expensive than they were before the Special Military Operation.

In fresh produce, the Russian greenhouses are bringing to market ever more prepackaged green salads that duplicate the varieties we see in Belgium: young green leaves and beet shoots, sprouts, crunchy leaf lettuce, rucola and the like.

This, in a country which until the 1990s understood salad to mean one thing: a variation on potato salad. Then in the 1990s and into the new century Russians who traveled abroad were buying and consuming green salads that were 100%



imported. Now there is an abundance coming from local green houses. In our times of sanctions, this means that the producers have solved the critical challenge of sourcing seeds, probably relying on Russian providers.

The sourcing of fruits on sale in supermarkets out of season, as at present, take you on a tour of the world. But whereas in Belgium this means Chile, Mexico or South Africa, here in Pushkin the supplying countries are entirely different. Today I discovered splendid seedless yellow grapes from India, an entirely new supplier. Then I bought a packet of 4 "Pink Lady" labeled apples. We have the same in Belgium coming from France. Here the source was Serbia.

Notwithstanding the principle of free internal market, in Belgium nearly all supermarket strawberries are sourced in Spain, where we all know there is overuse of chemicals in the farming. The exception is the premium quality local berries branded "Hoogstraat" that are worth their weight in gold and are priced accordingly. Here in Petersburg a week ago stalls in the city market were all selling fantastic strawberries said to come from Greece and priced at about the level of the much poorer quality Spanish fruit in Belgium. A few days later, Turkey was the source for premium quality strawberries. In a week or two, the same finest berries will be arriving from the Crimea. War and sanctions have in no way affected flows of some produce.

Returning to the issue of new product entries, all the supermarkets in Pushkin are now offering self-serve bins of pistachios, roasted almonds in shell and dried apricots. In the past, only the apricots were on offer, and they mostly were the consistency of shoe leather. Not now. All the named products are fresh, priced attractively and worth purchasing for the family. These are medium quality products coming from...Iran. Till now these food items were worth considering only at high priced kiosks in city markets where they were sold by Uzbeks and were sourced from Samarkand or other Central Asian centers. The products in the market were worthy of pashas and were so priced. Now, thanks to swaps with Iran, the market is democratized.

At times, I am genuinely surprised by the imagination and knowledge of supermarket procurement people. The Economy Class supermarket across from our apartment complex always was impressive for their wines. Before sanctions, they would offer Reserve editions of Spanish Riojas aged ten years or more for eight or nine euros. Now I am struck by their especially big selection of beers. Perhaps the presence of military families is a factor in their weighting of beverages. But I can buy here what is difficult if not impossible to find in a top supermarket in Belgium – not only Hoegaarden wheat beer, but also its nearest French competitor in the

category by Kronenbourg,. Palm, a premium dark blond beer from Ghent that you simply cannot find in Brussels, is right here in my Pushkin supermarket. InBev may have left Russia, but their products and the products of other leading European producers are easy to find on the shelves.

In soft drinks, our supermarkets are stocked with 1 liter and 1.5 liter bottles of PEPSI produced in Belarus! So Cola fans do not have to go down market to no-name brands.

If I may take a step back to fish, I would like to say a word about the fish counter at our premium supermarket Perekryostok in Pushkin. The selection on any given day is really not bad, no less in terms of variety than at my local Delhaize the Lion in Belgium. And nothing has changed in the assortment over the past year. We have small flounders from Murmansk at 4 euros per kilogram; superb salmon trout big enough to feed four, coming from nearby Lake Ladoga and priced at 8 euros per kilogram; salmon steaks, possibly Russian grown, at 18 euros per kilogram; Turkish origin farmed sea bass at 9 euros per kilogram; plus several types of Black Sea fish at less than 5 euros per kilogram. Since we are in mid spring, this is the season of the local hero of the fish markets, the sardine sized Koryushka, which makes its way down from Lake Ladoga to the Finnish Gulf to spawn once the ice breaks on the Neva River. The Koryushka has the aroma of fresh cucumber when you buy it and when fried lightly coated in flour yields a platter of food to rival the best of any *friture de poisson* on Lake Geneva. The fish are priced between 3.50 and 5.00 euros per kilogram depending on size.

Trends in meat retailing in Russia have followed the same trajectory as in France or Belgium: finest cuts and aged steaks are available vacuum packed in convenient portions in the chilled section of the supermarkets. This is so even in the more modest Economy chains. And the number of different cuts has only increased with time over the past year.

The local innovator who brought top quality butchered meats to the attention of Russian consumers is Miratorg. They and several competitors have developed beef farming in the Voronezh region of Central Russia and enjoy national distribution.

Now I see that a similar trend is coming to poultry. For several years now chicken parts, meaning breasts, legs, wings have been sold in Russian supermarkets fresh chilled. They have a three or four day shelf life. Now the latest innovation which I discovered on this trip is vacuum packed duckling filets marinated in sour cherry sauce with 10 day shelf life. You bake them at home. The quality is excellent and the

price is surprisingly low, about six euros for 500 grams of tender and flavorful duck meat. These, too, come from the Voronezh region. See the product offering of this remarkable farm group: <https://utinayaferma.ru/products/>

In passing, I mentioned above that Russia is moving aggressively to cashless commerce. In food retailing this is being promoted to consumers via television ads for bank debit cards that give you "cash back," meaning discounts of 5, 10 even 20% at the cash register when you pay by card. In fact "cash back" is so widely used in advertising that it has become a new Russian verb, the reflexive, intransitive verb кэшбэжиться. Russian language purists may cringe, but that is what is going on today.

As for supermarket prices, in general staple foods are priced here at three or four times below the prices in Western Europe for goods of similar quality. Let me give one example. I purchased a broiler chicken this morning. It weighed 1.2 kg and cost 1.60 euros, roughly one third the price in Brussels

To be sure, when I put the prices into euros I am using the present exchange rate in which the ruble is sharply underappreciated, as I noted earlier. It is presently around 90 rubles per euro, whereas purchasing price parity would suggest a rate of 60 rubles. However, this in no way explains a price 3 – 4 times less than Belgian prices. The Russian prices bespeak the fact of big grain surpluses in this country. Simply put, the wheat to feed poultry and livestock is very cheap.

Nonetheless, not everything in the supermarkets is similarly cheap compared to Western prices. Some of the delicacies I mentioned above are priced in line with what I see in Belgium, meaning they are quite expensive for the average Russian wage earner. However, cultural factors weigh in here. Russians today, just as Russians as I have seen them over the past fifty years, place great emphasis on generous hospitality. Therefore, products which may be ignored when buying groceries for the family, will be added to the shopping basket when preparing to entertain friends at home.

©Gilbert Doctorow, 2023

#### ARTICLE TAGS:

Analysis   Doctorow, Gilbert   Russia   Global South   Perekrestok   Ikea   Azbuka Vkusa  
Pepsi   Kronenbourg   InBev   Miratorg