One year in Moscow

МГИМО (MGIMO)
Moscow State Institute of International Relations

Academic year 2017 - 2018
Introduction

Now that the end of this year is approaching, I am not able to convince myself that my experience in Russia is almost over. Everything has become again as it was when I arrived. The restaurants have brought the tables outside on the terrace, there is music on the streets, the flowers are blossoming. Now that the snow has melted and that spring has come it is time to think about the 8 Russian months I have experienced and left behind me. Time has gone fast, maybe too fast, much faster than at SciencesPo. Never I would have expected that the long months of Russian winter would have passed so quickly in my perception. Now my third year abroad is almost over and I must analyze what I have gained from it.

I expected this year to be extremely hard, but ultimately it wasn’t so much. It was not my first year abroad, but the third one as France was already for me a foreign country. However, this year abroad was different from the others. This time I was in a non-Western nation, to the East of what used to be the Iron Curtain.

Russia was not a straightforward, easy, even logical choice for a student of the Euro-American program. For sure Russia was not a tropical country where to enjoy sunshine. Actually, I was the only one among more than 300 students of my program to apply to Russian universities. Where did my decision originate from? From a series of reasons I would say, one of which being that I was late to take the IELTS exam necessary to apply to Anglo-Saxon universities (MGIMO doesn’t require any language certification). Apart from this practical motivation I had a strong interest in this country. Having grown up in the most Eastern region of Italy, which used to represent the last Western territory before the Iron Curtain and which nowadays still represents the Italian gateway to Eastern Europe, I have always been interested in the relationship between the West and the East and in the differences between these two worlds. I also thought that, as I had always lived and studied in Western Europe, notably in Italy and France, I was still missing a different perspective on what I had learnt during my education, especially about international relations.

Moreover, Russia represented a unique opportunity to learn a new language. At high school I came across Russian culture by following an elective course on Russian cinema and literature and I started learning Russian by myself when I was 16 years old, but I then stopped because I didn’t have the possibility to take courses on it. Therefore, I envisaged this year as the right moment to study again such a language.

Thus, my personal interest for this former superpower drove me into Russia even though my obvious third year destination was the US. Was this a good choice? In the next pages I will try to demonstrate that it was.
1. Description of my experience

MGIMO, the “Harvard” of Russia
The Moscow State Institute of International Affairs is widely considered as the most prestigious Russian university in the field of social sciences. Even Henry Kissinger has defined it as the "Harvard of the East". As the name says, MGIMO is a State university, notably run by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and excels in international relations. Having educated several Russian top officials, including the current minister of foreign affairs, since its foundation in 1944, the university still offers a different perspective on international relations than the Western one. The fact that it is run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs guarantees that subjects are analyzed through a Russian perspective on the world. At the end of the Cold War with the emergence of a market based economy, the university adapted to the new world by diversifying its curriculum which came to include economics and business studies. Now the fields of studies are extremely numerous, ranging from the more traditional international relations program to programs in international journalism, “Metropolitan and Agglomeration Governance” and transnational business. Additionally, in more recent years MGIMO tried to internationalize itself and in 2013 inaugurated the School of Government and International Affairs administering an English-taught bachelor program in Government and International Affairs. It is thanks to the presence of this English program that you can study at MGIMO even if you don’t speak Russian. This was my case and the reason why I took all courses from this program.

Concerning the student body, MGIMO is a quite big university with 6,000 students. So it is hosted in a huge building which Russian students call the “horizontal skyscraper” due to the fact that it is extremely long, some 500 meters. Thanks to its 70 years of existence the university can count on 45,000 alumni present in over 70 countries.

Moreover, it is a very well-known university in Russia. When you tell locals that you study there they will be surprised and will look at you with respect (not knowing that you are just on exchange there). So if you are looking for a different, non-Western perspective on International Affairs MGIMO is the right place for you.

Courses

First semester

Apart from the course of Russian language, in the first semester I took 5 non-language courses. Classes lasted one hour and a half and, in my case, went from Monday to Saturday, leaving me just Sunday as a free day. In total I gained 34 credits (ECTS) from this semester.

Russian language - 18 credits
A relevant plus of MGIMO is that it offers a very intensive course of Russian language, more intensive than at any other partner university. This fact proved fundamental for a beginner like me to quickly progress.
It is not you to decide in which group and consequently level to go. In fact, at the beginning of the semester every exchange student sits a placement test and will be assigned to a group according to
his score. Nonetheless you still have some freedom if you feel that the level you have been assigned to does not correspond to your expectations. I have some friends who felt that the level of their group was too easy and moved to another one without any difficulty, just by asking the teachers.

Concerning my case, during summer I had started studying Russian because I didn’t want to start it at MGIMO as an absolute beginner. Thanks to my 3 months of learning I was able to be assigned to a group with students having studied Russian at university for one year.

A very positive aspect of MGIMO is that the groups are very small with just 6/7 students each. I must say that Russian is a very difficult language for its complex grammar. It is even more difficult when you speak a Latin and not a Slavic language because you must learn by heart an enormous amount of words as Russian vocabulary is completely different from ours. Your progress really depends on the personal effort you devote to studying. Attending classes is not enough and you must study at home so to memorize rules and learn new words by heart. Something I would really advise you to do is to start memorizing a lot of words from the very beginning so to broaden your vocabulary. This will help you to begin to speak Russian with people.

The evaluation consisted of a midterm exam and a final.

**Russian with Elena Jarkova - Tuesday: 15.55 to 20.30**
Elena is an excellent professor. She has a very good way of teaching, especially when it comes to grammar. She speaks English very fluently and this helps when it comes to the explanation of difficult grammar rules. Having 3 classes per week with her was a luck because through her help we were able to quickly progress. She is also very open to any request concerning subjects you want to analyze. Every time she gives a large amount of homework which is a good incentive to work hard on grammar. In the end, I must say that an important part of my progress is thanks to her.

**Russian with Alexandra Kasimirchuk - Wednesday: 15.55 to 19.00**
Alexandra is another good professor. She is very well organized, doesn’t lose time, and explains grammar very well. Unfortunately we had just 2 classes per week with her.

**Russian with Tatyana Markova - Thursday: 15.55 to 19.00**
With this teacher the focus was more on reading and listening. Very often the second class was devoted to watching a movie in Russian. It was very hard to understand what the actors were saying in the film and this fact gave us an idea of how low our level still was.

**Russian with Anastasia Feklicheva - Friday: 15.55 to 19.00**
The teacher is quite young and a little bit shy. However, she prepared well the classes. She made us read several Russian fairy tales. This was a good exercise to learn new words while discovering Russian popular culture.

**Contemporary International Relations - Andrei Zagorski - 4 credits**
Maybe the best professor I had at MGIMO, Andrei Zagorski is extremely knowledgeable about global affairs. He is an academician who has started his career when the Soviet Union was still there. He collaborates with the OSCE. Every major issue of international affairs is covered, from the US in world politics, to China, to the international position Russian is aspiring to. Every geopolitical region of the world was analyzed. It was interesting to see emerge across the lines a Russian perspective on international affairs. I would for sure retake this course and advise anyone to take it. Every week there is a lecture followed by a seminar. The evaluation consists of a written test and a presentation on which a short paper has to be written.

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**Little note on language courses**
Unfortunately at MGIMO you cannot study other foreign languages than Russian unless you are willing to pay a fee for the course.
Armed Conflicts in the 21st Century - Ekaterina Stepanova - 3 credits
The course is a good introduction to the major dynamics of political violence in our age. The approach is quite theoretical as it does not analyze in detail each major conflict of the past 20 years. On the contrary, the teacher uses them as examples to explain major dynamics of violence in our age. Topics range from ideological violence, to the role of the black economy in conflicts, to terrorist networks. The professor is knowledgeable and has published different books especially on the topic of Islamist terrorism. There is no discussion in class as she teaches for the whole hour and a half. The subject is very broad and the course is just an introduction to political violence. Nonetheless if you have never taken a course on the subject and think you will not during masters, maybe you should consider taking it just to have a deeper understanding of contemporary armed conflicts.
For this subject we had to write a commentary on a book (or on a long report if the professor agrees with that), to pass some tests, to write a long research paper on a topic of our choice, to present the results of this research in class and to pass a final exam. As you may have understood the workload was very high considered that the course is worth only 3 ECTS. However, if you are interested in security studies, the effort is probably worth it.
At the end of the semester we conducted an interesting simulation of an international security crisis. The case consisted of a new war between Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh, which is a de facto independent State protected by Armenia and located within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan. The simulated armed conflict was crafted on the military conflict fought in April 2016 between the two entities and having resulted in more than 30 casualties. We simulated cease-fire talks in the framework of the OSCE. We were divided by groups of two and each pair represented a stakeholder: Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh, Armenia, Russia, the United States, France, the OSCE and even, as observers, the Red Cross and the press. I played the role of Nagorno-Karabakh and I really enjoyed it because I had to negotiate with Russian, Bulgarian, American students representing other States and having different perceptions about the possible resolution of the crisis. Interestingly, military actions were not discarded as solutions and were actually very much appreciated by most students. Probably if we had done the same simulation at SciencesPo this would not have been the case. It was the first time I participated in a simulation like this and I was surprised by its complexity and by our incapacity to negotiate effectively.

Economics of Politics and International Relations - Anton G. Oleynov - 3 credits
A course that I had expected to be better. It deals with the application of economic analysis to politics and international relations. This means that it describes possible approaches to analyze and predict social phenomena through the use of quantitative methods. If you have never studied rational choice theory, game theory or ever heard of Neuroeconomics, it may be a good opportunity to get an introduction about them. The professor knows his subject well and is passionate about it. However, maybe because of students' lack of mathematical skills maybe because the subject is too broad to get into the details of every theory, everything is analyzed superficially and without going into the explanation of the theories. What the professor presents to you is a list of formulas and theories without a proper demonstration. In other words, he describes very broadly and not in mathematical terms what those formulas mean and why they are relevant. What you can retain from the course is just a general understanding of how social mechanisms can be analyzed through economic models. Nonetheless the course is not a bad introduction to an interesting topic, the analysis of political phenomena from the point of view of economics. An interesting part of the course deals with the many fallacies/divergences our mind has in relation to rational choice.
The evaluation consists of some presentations you have to do during the 3 workshops.

Negotiation - Anton Marushev - 4 credits
One of the best courses I have taken at MGIMO. The professor is not coming from the academic world and is a professional in the field of procurement. This fact combined with the energetic character of the teacher made the course very practice-oriented. In other words, the course
teaches you how to conduct a negotiation in practice. Contrary to most other courses I almost never got tired and bored. In fact, the lessons were very interactive. The evaluation consisted of a written test and a simulation of negotiation. If you have a high enough grade you don't need to take part into the final exam, which consists of another negotiation.

The Politics of International Monetary Union - Anna Tsibulina - 3 credits
This subject just lasted half a semester with a single lecture per week. This fact allowed the course to be just a very basic introduction to monetary unions. The most interesting aspect it dealt with was the concept of optimal currency area proposed by Robert Mundell. The professor used the criteria set forth by this model to analyze the performances of different currency areas. The European Union was the main case study, but also different regions of the world were analyzed through the spectrum of their suitability to become monetary unions. An interesting part was the history of how the European monetary union came into being through a number of international political disputes. Unfortunately we didn't go into depth in any subject. I would say that you probably don't need this basic introduction if you have already studied the monetary policy. The evaluation consisted of a single test (2 tests for the people who didn't get a high score) and an optional presentation.

Teaching Italian to Chinese students
During the first semester thanks my Chinese roommates I was contacted by two Chinese girls who were on exchange at MGIMO and wanted to learn Italian. I was surprised by their interest for my mother tongue and immediately accepted to teach it to them. Every Saturday morning we did 2 hours of lesson. The experience was challenging because it was my first time to teach to foreigners. I quickly understood how difficult it is to teach a language, especially to complete beginners.

Second semester

The “great” reform of the schedule
In the first semester one class lasted one hour and a half, but starting from the second semester the administration decided to reduce it to just one hour and 20 minutes. This is well below the 2 hours per class we have at SciencesPo. The feeling is that classes are quite short. Nonetheless, even though classes are shorter, the total amount of hours per course is very similar to the 24 hours we have a SciencesPo because there are more weeks of courses per semester. This reform also resulted in a change in the schedule of the classes. In effect, now classes start at 9 AM and not anymore at 8:30 AM.

Russian language - 18 credits
I will analyze again the Russian courses because even though the amount of hours per week remained the same, the activities we did changed by much. In effect, we started to work on newspapers and much more on listening and reading. This semester the evaluation will consist only of the final exam, written and oral.

Russian with Elena Jarkova - Tuesday: 17.35 to 20.20; Wednesday: 16.00 to 18.55; Thursday: 16.00 to 18.55
Elena, the professor of Russian language I had appreciated the most, taught us 6 courses out of 9 during the spring semester. This fact proved to be very positive because it gave continuity to what we were doing during the week.
We still continued working on grammar, but much less than in the first semester. We spent many hours reading articles about three themes, notably international relations, the elections and terrorism. Every week we were assigned the reading of a fairy tale with the same objective of broadening our vocabulary. This semester each of us had to do an oral presentation.

**Russian with Dremov - Wednesday: 19.00 to 20.20**
The teacher is a philologist. His classes were focused on analyzing the words contained in a press article chosen by the teacher. He explained us the etymology of the words and how they relate to other words having a common origin. This was a good exercise to understand that even Russian language which looks like so complex has logical mechanisms.

**Russian with Alexandra Kasimirchuk - Friday: 14.30 to 17.20**
Also this semester the teacher helped us progress with grammar. I really appreciated her concise and precise explanations of difficult grammar rules.

**Technology and International Relations - 3 credits**
A very good and unusual course taught by academicians who are experts in the relationship between the progress of technology and the development of society. Given my interests in the impact of technology on society this course was an obvious choice and a good surprise. It was the first time I found a course like this at university.

A vast amount of lectures is future-oriented in the sense that they analyze the probable consequences of emerging technologies ranging from drones to supersonic missiles. The course is taught by four professors that are all very expert in their respective field. They all work at the PIR Center, a think-tank based in Moscow and focused on control and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

**Introduction to accounting - Georgy Khachidze - 3 credits**
I took this bachelor course because at SciencesPo I had studied corporate law and was still unable to understand the income statement of a company. Actually, we had studied several cases of companies having cooked the books, but we did not have the skills to understand how that could be practically done as we didn’t know the principles of the accounting practice. So this course looked like an unique opportunity to cover my lack of knowledge. The professor is a professional who works as Chief Financial Officer of a major company operating in the oil and gas sector. Even though he has practice mostly in Russian accounting the course covers the international practice of accounting according to the IFRS (International Financial Reporting Standards). The course is just an introduction and analyzes the basic concepts. Nonetheless, it allows you to read and understand the statement of financial position that every listed company has to publish.

A book would be required and would be probably useful to practice the concepts seen in class, but I managed to do without it just by studying the slides the professor sent us and using resources freely available on the internet. The evaluation consists of three tests across the semester and an optional analysis and presentation of a listed company’s statement of financial position.

**Russian economy - Elena Zavyalova and Oleg Pichkov - 3 credits**
As the name says the course analyzes in depth the Russian economy in its different spheres. Taught by two professors it alternates a lecture and a seminar every week. The overall aim is to give students a broad appreciation of the fundamentals of the Russian economy. The different sectors contributing to economic development, the Russian economic institutions, the economic and monetary policies, the financial markets were covered. The unusual and attractive aspect of this course is that the professors try to give to the students a holistic appreciation of the economy of an entire country. So far, at SciencesPo I have never found a course titled “French Economy”. Beyond the knowledge they provide you, the lectures, following such a comprehensive approach, help you understand the general mechanisms that drive every economy. In this way, the course helps you grasp the structure of an economy and how public policy can influence it. The whole
subject gets even more interesting due to the fact that the economy into question has gone through a serious crisis in the past few years and has faced the economic sanctions imposed by the West. One professor, Oleg Pichkov, who is the Dean of the Faculty of International Economic Relations, is one of the most knowledgeable persons I have ever met. The second professor, Elena Zavyalova, is very particular due to her displayed patriotism and passion for the Russian economy. Even though sometimes her lectures may get quite biased (at least from a western perspective), she is very energetic and it is interesting for an European student to see how she defends the economic policies of the Russian government. She is quite theatrical when she addresses us as “my dear Russian (or foreign) students”, but apart from that her lessons also provide abundant food for thought. For instance, she passionately argued that Western sanctions against Russia did not work at all, pointing to the fact that more people are now dependent on state investment as foreign direct investment has plummeted due to sanctions. The evaluation consists of a midterm with extremely precise and often ambiguous questions on statistics of the Russian economy and of a final exam.

Student events at MGIMO

Concert of the students of Russian language
The event took place in December and was organized by a very active professor of Russian language. The students had the opportunity to recite poems in Russian or foreign languages, to sing songs, and even to represent a short theatre play in Russian. I personally recited the poem of the Iliad in Ancient Greek and the poem “Я вас любил” by Pushkin. The concert is a very good opportunity to appreciate the Eastern internationalism so present at MGIMO. In effect, not only students from Eastern Europe recite poems in their mother tongue, but also Asians bring their culture on stage, which is something I had never seen at SciencesPo.

Franco-Russian Poetry Contest
In April I took part in a poetry contest organized by the “Amicale Française” of MGIMO. A few weeks before the event every French speaking participant was coupled with a Russian student so that he would recite a Russian poem and the parter a French one. This was a good opportunity to meet Russian students and to practice with them the recitation of the poem.
2. Comparative dimension of my experience

Confronting difference and adapting to it

Experiencing something different was probably the main reason why I preferred Russia over the US as my destination for the third year. I considered that it is not material distance from Western Europe that is relevant to find such a different perspective, but the historical, cultural and political diversity a nation has in respect to the West. This is why I thought that not the US, but rather Russia could offer me a different way of seeing reality. And I can now say that I was right. In effect, during this year I have encountered and had to face many differences with respect to my European life.

I must say that this year in Russia was not my first experience abroad which was the case for most other exchange students. In effect, I had already lived abroad in France (as I’m Italian) for two years and was already confronted with the difficulties of living far from home and coping with “difference”.

The first difference I encountered in Russia was the fact of living for the first time in a metropolis. In effect, I come from a very small village in the Italian countryside and Reims was not such a big city. Nonetheless, moving to a gigantic capital city with 20 million inhabitants was not such a big shock. Maybe It wasn’t because Moscow is very huge in terms of space, extending for an enormous area of land. In effect, the city develops horizontally and not vertically as it is the case for New York. Between two condominiums there is very often a garden and there is plenty of public parks. So you don’t feel oppressed by the fact that there are 20 million inhabitants.

I quickly got used to the big distances that are a constant in your life in Moscow and Russia. It takes almost an hour to get from MGIMO to the city center, some 30 minutes of walk to reach the metro station (you can take the bus to there, but I prefer walking) and then a 25 minutes ride by metro to closest station to the Red Square.

Moreover, Moscow is a different city from all those I have been to. I would argue that it is one of the most representative cities of the short twentieth century, a metropolis where the holistic project of ideology has left its imprint. I think nowhere in the world you can see an urban environment so much permeated by political symbols and architecture. The symbol of the hammer and sickle is omnipresent as well as the architectural heritage of a former superpower. Not many new buildings have been built since the collapse of the Soviet Union with the exception of the Moscow International Business Center. This gives to the city a particular atmosphere, very different from Western Europe.

For sure Moscow is not an ancient city as almost every building but the Kremlin was destroyed by the 1812 fire during the Napoleonic occupation. There are some palaces built in the 19th century, but most of the buildings were built in the 20th century under Soviet rule when the city became the capital of the USSR and the population skyrocketed. So, in a sense, it is a modern capital, at least more modern than Haussmannian Paris. However, this modernity is the modernity of the time of the Soviet Union, especially represented by the architecture typical of the late 50s, 60s. This is why I would define Moscow as a city characterized by a form of old modernity. This fact makes it a good city where to grasp the heritage of last century. In effect, the difference between Soviet architecture full of symbolic elements and the few buildings built before the revolution is striking. It is even more interesting to observe these relics of a past age when you consider that this is the country where Fukuyama’s “end of history” started when the red flag was furled from the Kremlin on the 25th December 1991.

Nonetheless never forget that Moscow is not everything in Russia and is often an exception to the living conditions you find in provincial areas. When you travel and encounter provincial Russia,
especially small-medium sized cities and villages you go back to a world that has not modernized since the 50s and even before. When traveling around the city of Rossosh (Россошь is midway from Moscow to Rostov on the Don) I was surprised to see how similar the houses were to those photographed during the Second World War. Traveling in the countryside is a good way to see how different some parts of Russia still are in respect to Western Europe and even Moscow. Striking are the abandoned factories you see in countryside, reminding you of the collapse of the Soviet economic system based on heavy industry. I was impressed by the small villages lost in the steppe where, according to what locals told me, live just бабушки (elderly ladies) and mid-aged males, most of them unemployed and alcohol-addicted. The youngsters have abandoned those areas moving to Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Coming to more everyday differences the language is a huge practical difference you will face at every moment of your stay. And by language I also mean the tone of voice and the attitudes that may make your expression funny instead of angry. Unfortunately, even after a year in Russia I have not overcome completely such a linguistic gap.

Another difference is the understanding of good manners. This is an important difference to grasp because it will avoid you some bad situations. For example, contrary to what happens in France, people form a line at the bus stop. Another Russian good manner, if you are a male, is to open the door to girls and let them enter first. You will learn these cultural differences very soon by observing what other people do.

Living in a country with a different culture, traditions, history is not only an occasion to discover a new world, but also represents a rare opportunity to give yourself a term of comparison. In effect, you will get to understand that certain social security and workplace safety provisions we have in the West are not present here. For example it always strikes me the lack of basic safety rules for workers. Builders (who are mostly all immigrants from Central Asia) do not wear earplugs to protect themselves from the extreme noises produced by the machines they are using. It is clear that in the long run this fact will ruin their hearing. However, even though earplugs cost very little, they prefer not wearing them.

Another fact that surprised me is the absence of manholes in the streets. In Europe you usually don’t notice the presence of manholes because you give them and their utility for granted. In Russia I understood their importance. In effect, their absence and the absence of a proper sewer system means that the streets get flooded every time it rains quite heavily. This is to say that the difference with Western Europe emerges even from some small things.

One of the biggest differences from Italy and one you physically feel on your body is the Russian weather. The Russian winter is one of the most specific features of life in Russia. It goes well beyond a simple weather condition and influences life, culture, habits in many manners. Moreover, it has had a deep impact on the history of Russia as a strong ally against invasions. You will find more about the long months of Russian winter in the annexes.
In conclusion, you will experience many differences in Russia. Sometimes you will have to cope with them, but in the long run you will adapt to them. I would say that experience “difference” and learning from it is one of the main reasons why you should come to Russia.

The socio-cultural context of Russia

During the third year abroad some of the major contributions to your personal development will not come from academic courses, but from the very fact of living in a different country, from experiencing its culture and traditions. Writing this paragraph I am realizing how much my several encounters with difference contributed to my personal development.

The academic year 2017-2018 corresponded to an year very rich of events in Moscow and in Russia. The first was the 870th anniversary of the foundation of Moscow. The event was well celebrated with the opening of a new park along the Moskva river and with temporary installations narrating the Russian literary and scientific achievements in the Tverskaya Ulitsa, which is the most central street of Moscow. The event was also accompanied by major renovation works all over Moscow, works that are making the city very pleasant to live in.

In November fell a very important and controversial anniversary, the 100 years since the October Revolution (as you probably know it is called October revolution because, before the Bolsheviks took power, the Russian Empire still followed the Julian calendar). I went to the city center on the 7th of November and I expected huge commemorations. However, there was nothing but a meeting of the Communist party to commemorate the anniversary. Very interestingly, the government had decided to organize a military parade on the Red Square on that day, but not to remember the revolution. In effect, the parade was a re-enactment of the parade which took place on the 7th November 1941 in the context of the battle of Moscow and which represented a symbol of defiance against the German invaders. So it had nothing to do with the Soviet coup which seems to be still controversial in Russia.

Then in March came the presidential elections. I cannot say I have really taken the most out of this event because you need to read newspapers and watch TV debates in Russian in order to really understand what is going on. Nonetheless it has been a particular experience.

Our exchange year will end with the beginning of another major event for Russia, the World Cup. I was very enthusiastic about the fact that I would be in the country hosting such an important sport event. However, my interest plummeted due to the fact that Italy failed to qualify for it!

Now, coming to the more concrete socio-cultural context I experienced during my stay, I will start by analyzing the atmosphere I found at MGIMO. Something you will notice as soon as the semester begins is the amount of luxury cars in front of the university and in its parking. Inside it is not much different. It looks like a continuous fashion show with girls dressing up in a way I have seen nowhere else. It is easy to understand that this Russian elite university appearance is very important. I believe that this aspect is very different from what happens at SciencesPo where wealthy people don’t show off.

Furthermore, the student body of MGIMO consists mostly of Moscovites who still live with their parents and go back home after class. This means that you will not live with them also because the dormitory is mainly reserved to foreign students. So I didn’t have the opportunity to have many Russian friends. This is partly due my laziness and partly due to the fact that very soon you will become integrated in the small and very cohesive community of exchange students.

Life in the dormitory is another interesting experience. For me it was the first time to share my room with another student and our sort of little apartment with two more. This student housing system is for sure an heritage of the Soviet Union as well as the building where we live, a dormitory (in Russian общийкіт, obsheshijie) built in the 80s. The concept was to teach communal life from a young age. In the welcome presentation of MGIMO they argue that having to share a room is the first step to become a good diplomat as you are forced to learn the basics of negotiation and of peaceful coexistence.
Even though you may not have many Russian friends, you can make an interesting encounter with Russian culture every time you have to do the laundry. In the dormitory there are not self-service washing machines. If you want to wash your clothes you must bring them to the laundry room (прачечная) where a person will take care of them. This person is Olga, a lady in her 50s and probably the most well-known person by international students. She is the only one working in the laundry room and, having at her disposal just 5 washing machines, has to face the 800 students living in the dormitory and willing to wear clean shirts. You may understand that often, especially on some days, it becomes extremely difficult to find a place in the number of people who will be allowed to wash their clothes on that day. And here come the little gifts (consisting mainly of chocolate boxes) that almost every student brings to Olga from time to time. In effect, a “no, there is no space left” may become a “yes” or “not now, but later yes” if you try to be kind with her and offer her some little gifts (she really likes souvenirs!). These gifts might be called tips for the work she does as she puts the clothes in the washing machine for you, but also, in other words, small bribes. This corruption system which according to my professor of Russian Economy pervades every level of Russian society from the plumber to the high-ranking official is a major difference from Western Europe. Probably even in our countries there is some corruption, but here in Russia it is open, visible, and usually accepted (at least on the street level). Moreover, for us it may become very difficult to understand when it is the case to give tips/bribes and especially whether the person receiving them will not feel offended by your effort to bribe her. I would say that bribing is a difficult art that us Westerners are not mastering so well. Nonetheless I really think that these encounters with Olga really help you understand how things may work differently in Russia and how some practices considered very bad in Western Europe may be accepted somewhere else.

Now, turning to the life out of university, I must speak about the social context you observe walking in Moscow’s streets. Something that differs from Europe is the condition of the elders in Moscow. They are living on a pension of about 150 euros per month which is very little to survive in an expensive city like Moscow. You see elderly ladies (бабушки) begging on the streets everywhere, in the city center as well as in the periphery. However, there is an heritage of the Soviet Union which partially saves the situation. In effect, most Moscovites own an apartment because after the collapse of the USSR the apartments were given as private property to the people inhabiting them. It is also sad to see, especially in the countryside in the villages I went to, the absence of old males. In effect, life expectancy for males in Russia is 66.5 years, while for females 77 years. This is why you will only see very elderly ladies, but not very old gentlemen.

Something I have found striking is the relevance of the past on Russian present. The heritage of the Soviet Union in terms of infrastructure and also mentality is, for sure, extremely important and visible. Moreover, the Soviet victory in the Second World War has become a fundamental point of unity for all Russians. The 9th of May the whole country celebrates the victory day and remembers the 20 million Soviet citizens that lost their life during the Great Patriotic War. Our teacher of Russian language told us that this is the most important holiday of the year because every family suffered from the loss of a relative during the conflict.
Moreover, living in Russia allows you to experience the practical consequences of politics. In effect, due to the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US you will not find fresh produce imported from Europe. So no more Italian Parmesan on your pasta!

Sometimes you understand that there are some big cultural differences can be between Russia and Western Europe. Every time I met a Russian out of university, be him the taxi driver or a passenger on a night train, they always asked me two questions: “Are you married? Do you have children?” Well, I’m still 21 and for Italian standards I should wait to find a secure job before thinking about marriage, something that in my home country happens when you are around 30 years old. I have discovered that here in Russia it is still common to marry very early, sometimes when you are still at university and you don’t earn a salary. A Russian friend told me how a 19 year old friend of her got married with a guy she had met at a concert three months before.

**MGIMO vs SciencesPo**

Before starting the comparison between the two universities, I must say that my analysis will be just partial because I have only followed courses administered by the English programs of MGIMO. Quite understandably most programs and courses are in Russian, but my level of Russian did not allow me to follow them. I just tried once at the beginning of the second semester, but I had to give up because I was not able to follow also because the professor did not use slides. Moreover, according to what I have heard the English programs are much less intensive than the Russian ones which may be more similar to SciencesPo standards.

First, concerning the workload exchange students can take less courses than regular students. This is possible thanks to the great amount of credits the courses of Russian language gives you. For example, in the first semester I took 5 courses apart from Russian, while in the second just 3. I could take less courses in the second semester. So, here a first advantage compared to the years at SciencesPo: you can adapt your schedule according to your necessities. For example, if you want to do a traineeship in the second semester you can take many courses in the first so that you will have much free time in the second. Nonetheless the possibility of creating the schedule that best fits you is more an advantage of your status of exchange students rather than a feature of MGIMO. Moreover, with the 60 credits SciencesPo require you to gain in a year the workload was not so intense. After two frenetic years in France I really enjoyed having a lower workload so that I could also focus on other extracurricular subjects I have interest in.

On the contrary, the schedule is very busy for regular students who have as many courses as we have at SciencesPo. Moreover, classes usually go from Monday to Saturday. So, while we exchange students can freely decide to concentrate our courses on 2/3 days so to be able to travel, MGIMO students are usually tied to a 6 days working week. That said, the English programs at MGIMO are less intensive than the Russian programs, especially for what concern the amount of work required for each course. In effect, when speaking with students studying in Russian they always complain about the huge workload they have.

Concerning the credit system, MGIMO is integrated in the Bologna process and consequently credits will be measured in ECTS as it happens in France.

A difference from SciencesPo is that Russian bachelors last 4 years. This is explained by the fact that Russians enter university when they are 17. So you will be able to choose courses from the different years, knowing that the courses of the early years are usually introductions to subjects, while the later ones are more specific.

The value of diversity at MGIMO is very high. The university is international with students coming from many foreign countries, 60 as the website states. The origins of foreign students differ greatly...
from European universities with students coming especially from the former Soviet republics (now CIS countries) and some Eastern states with strong links with Russia, such as Vietnam, China, even India. There are also some students from North Korea and Syria. It is interesting to see how the international atmosphere at MGIMO is very different, quasi-alternative to the Western one we find at SciencesPo. It is for sure a kind of Eastern internationalism as the origin of most foreign students is Eastern. However, the very features of this internationalism are different from Europe. In effect, at SciencesPo there are for sure many foreign students but they are mostly assimilated in the Western culture. Here at MGIMO foreign students tend to maintain their own culture and do not necessarily adopt the Russian way of life. In this way, the diversity of the student body is very huge and both on campus and in the student dormitory you can experience it. Maybe if you would like to understand even more this atmosphere where no culture stands over the others you should join the International Students' Association, which aims at emphasizing MGIMO's cultural diversity.

Most exchange students were not satisfied with the level of the courses, which on average are less demanding than in SciencesPo. The professors are for sure less demanding and sometimes not prepared so much to teach. However, from my direct experience I would say that there are some excellent courses and some excellent professors, who you could hardly find even at SciencesPo. In effect, it must not be forgotten that MGIMO is the most prestigious Russian university in the field of international relations and many other social sciences. This means that some of the best professors of Russia teach here. The difficult thing is to distinguish good courses from bad ones and the title very often does not help.

Here at MGIMO the professor is omnipotent. He/she usually administers a lesson with students having little opportunity to interact. It is more of a lecture than a seminar. The professor can decide whether you can miss class, anticipate an exam, don't do a presentation. On the contrary, the administration has little power when it comes to how classes are taught. Therefore, if you have any request just ask the professors (who are often very open to exchange students' requests).

Languages play a fundamental role in the education of MGIMO students. A great amount of resources is put into maintaining high the quality of linguistic departments. It is noticeable the fact that MGIMO has been awarded the world record for the most languages taught, which are 53, many more than the ones you can study at SciencesPo. Every year some students have to go out of MGIMO mastering some of the least spoken languages in the world. For example, some 5 students will have to study Mongol. Even the current Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, studied at MGIMO very particular languages, notably Sinhalese (one of the languages spoken in Sri Lanka) and Dhivehi (the language of the Maldives). Then he started his diplomatic career in Sri Lanka. Such an excellence of linguistic education proves to be very useful for the maintenance of the strength of Russian diplomacy all over the world. Moreover, the system prepares students for their future career as for them it will be easy, once having the needed competences, to be hired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The only pity for us exchange students is that we cannot take language courses other than Russian.

In conclusion, I would NOT advise you to come to Russia if you are looking for the academic excellence of Columbia University or Oxford. Here at MGIMO you will find something that in those Western universities you cannot have: a different perspective on the world to challenge your convictions.
3. Contribution of your experience

New knowledge

This year at MGIMO has allowed me to take courses on subjects that I had not studied at SciencesPo such as security and accounting. Actually, I tried to take the courses that I knew I could not study in my master as they concerned different disciplines. This means that this third year allowed me not only to put some order in the great amount of knowledge I acquired in France, but also to expand even more the multidisciplinarity of my bachelor studies.

Moreover, knowledge is not just about the amount of things you know, but also about the understanding and the perspective you have on them. For example, I was able to learn much about international affairs, while at the same time grasping another perspective on international affairs.

Finally, the knowledge I have got from this experience is not only the one I have acquired in classes, but also all the little reflections I was able to make when walking around Moscow, traveling in Russia and observing how society works here. I really believe to have learnt much by living in this city that I consider one of the “capitals” of the twentieth century.

Thus, as I have already said, in this experience academic courses will likely not be the most important contribution to your personal development. When you are out of the university’s walls and experience a new country with its culture and tradition this is also an extremely enriching experience and something you could not do at SciencesPo. So remember that you will be able to find academic courses in any university of the world, while Russian society is just here. Hence, a good reason to choose Russia as your destination for the third year!

New skills I have learnt

Quite obviously living in a different country helps you understand that different people may have different understandings of the world. Being confronted with difference is always an experience that helps you grow. I would say that Russia is, for a person coming from Western Europe, one of the best places to question your most intimate convictions and the relevance of your Western identity. When you are continuously challenged by difference you may become a more conscious, and balanced individual. And I think that his has been my case, especially in relationship to my understanding of international affairs.

Moreover, this year has increased my capacity to adapt to a different living environment. Still, I am not sure whether I would be able to live in any part of the world after this experience in Russia. Nonetheless I have learnt how to better cope with the difficulties you encounter when you move abroad, difficulties ranging from the harsh temperatures, to a language you don’t understand, to a different culture.

But coming to some more concrete skills I have learned or bettered during my stay, one of the most relevant things I did at MGIMO was to learn a new language. I had started studying Russian in the summer prior to my departure. Now that I’m leaving I have reached a B1 level, maybe not so high having lived one year in Moscow, but at least a level which is worth showing on a curriculum vitae. I am convinced that the relevance of Russian language on the international job market is quite big and even increasing. In effect, Russian is not only the official language of the Russian Federation and one of the six official languages of the United Nations, but also a widely spoken language in the former Soviet Republics, whose economies are emerging in these years. Given the fact that the Caucasian and Central-Asian former Soviet states are attracting more and more investors from the West, speaking a language that is widely spoken in those countries may incentivize some multinational companies operating in those regions to hire you. Moreover, apart from the professional advantages of speaking Russian, knowing this language is the gateway to understand Russia more into depth. In effect, it allows you to read press articles which help you grasp the Russian position. It also enables you to read some Russian poetry and literature in its original language. And most importantly it allows you to communicate and exchange views with
Russian people. So I consider the level of Russian I have reached in this year abroad as the most important hard skill I have developed. Next year I will continue studying it, but passing from the 13 hours of classes per week I have now to the 2 SciencesPo offers, will be a major change.

**Russia and my future**

My motivation letter was titled “A year to understand the World (and myself)”. In effect, I envisaged this third year abroad as the opportunity to better understand what I wanted to study for masters, which means what kind of direction I wanted to give to my life. I don’t think Russia deeply changed me and gave me an answer to that. Nonetheless it has been a very important year for me, a year when I have chosen what to do for masters. I had come to Russia willing to take a gap year between bachelor and masters, but then I changed my mind. Even though it is not due to Russia that I have chosen my masters, it is for sure in the context of my experiences in Russia that I have taken my decisions. In effect, experiencing such a different country gave me the will to better understand the general mechanisms regulating this world. This is one of the reasons why I decided to apply to the double master SciencesPo - Peking University. Moreover, I have understood that in the future I would not dislike coming back to Moscow for a traineeship or even to work.
Conclusion

Have I achieved the objectives I had set forward in my motivation letter? Probably not completely, but to some extent yes. I am writing this concluding paragraph by looking at what I had written in my motivation letter and confronting my objectives with what I have achieved during this year.

First, the experience helped me (at least partially) to satisfy the thirst of knowledge I have about Russia. Actually one regret is not having taken courses on Russian history that would have helped me to understand the current mentality.

Second, I was able to better understand the heritage of the short twentieth century which according to the historian Eric Hobsbawn begins and ends in Russia.

Third, I was able to start learning a new language that I am fascinated by and that should be an asset on the international job market.

By experiencing the country and learning the Kremlin's point of view I was able to gain a deeper understanding of global politics and of how the West is perceived in the international arena. At the same time I was challenged by a different way of seeing reality. In this way, By understanding Russia I have better understood the controversial stances of an emerging powerful actor of the 21st century.

Moreover, living in Russia has allowed me to experience the practical consequences of politics whenever going to a supermarket and looking for true Parmesan.

Finally I ended my motivation letter with this statement: “I know that my will to experience a different world during my 3rd year is probably for me the hardest choice I could make because I don't speak the language of the country I want to go to, and because I will have to question my most intimate convictions about international affairs and about my Western identity. Nonetheless I am sure that no other choice could challenge me as much, and finally make me a more conscious, and balanced individual.” I can now say that I was right.

Thus, with my Russian stay coming to an end, I hope that the next years will resemble this one in terms of interesting experiences and intellectual growth.
Attachments

Pre-departure administrative procedures

Visa
Without a visa you cannot enter Russia. So the visa application is an important step necessary to study at MGIMO. In July you will receive an e-mail containing your number of electronic visa's invitation. This number will be enough to receive the 90 days visa and you don't need an invitation letter because MGIMO is an institution under the Foreign Ministry of Russia. In October you will have to apply to a one year visa with unlimited entries. During the procedure lasting one month, you will have to hand in your passport to the immigration office. During this period you will not be able to travel out of Moscow.

Finding an accommodation
An easy task for once if you accept to live in a Soviet dormitory (look below for the description of my experience). In the form you will receive in March after you have been assigned to MGIMO you will have to indicate whether you intend to live in the dormitory or you are going to find a private accommodation. Bear in mind the fact that private housing is quite expensive in Moscow.

Health
I was surprised by how many documents confirming a good status of health you have to provide to MGIMO. You will have to hand those documents to the international office when you arrive to Russia. These documents include medical certificates with HIV, RW and hepatitis tests. Moreover, you must have an insurance for your stay at MGIMO. You will have to give a copy of it to the international office. You can choose whether to make an insurance before coming to Russia, that is to say when you are in your home country or buy it in Russia. If you choose the second, know that MGIMO has a medical center which sells an insurance valid for the whole year. Its advantage is that if you get ill, you can go to the medical center of the university instead of a faraway one. In my case I had made in Italy a 3 months insurance to cover my arrival and the first weeks. Then I bought the insurance sold by MGIMO.

Studying at MGIMO

The two integration weeks
You will have to be in Russia two weeks before the beginning of the semester which for me meant on the 19th of August, which was also the first day of the visa. In these two weeks takes place the integration period. The activities are very few and to integrate it is not so useful. Activities start at 11 and consist of some introduction to the bureaucratic procedures you will have to fulfill and some lectures on Russian history. You will be busy just in the morning, early afternoon and you will be free for the rest of the day. You will do very little in those days, but the period is important to fulfill the bureaucratic formalities, which are many.

Registering for courses
Contrary to SciencesPo there are not the electronic inscriptions to courses (inscriptions pédagogiques en ligne). At MGIMO you will be sent by the referent of the international office the schedule with the courses. Then you will choose the ones you want to follow and just go there for the first class. You will have to tell the professor that you are an exchange student. Most often they
accept you without any problem and just add you to the list of their students. Finally you will go to
the Bologna office where you will communicate the courses you have chosen so that they can
prepare the learning agreement for you. At the end of the semester you will have to return to the
same office to get your results certified by MGIMO.

**The university**
MGIMO has 6,000 students. This means that the premises are huge when compared to the
regional campuses of SciencesPo. Apart from the large number of classrooms I really enjoyed
having big canteens and many cafes inside the campus. In effect, especially, in winter it is very
convenient not to have to go outside in order to have lunch or a drink. There is also a pharmacy, a
bookshop, and a printer available for students. The advantages of big universities!

**Living in Moscow**

**Living in the Soviet dormitory: not so bad in the end if you adapt to it**
1. First positive aspect: consider yourself lucky to be guaranteed a place in a dormitory that is
literally next to university (you have to walk just 100 meters to reach the entrance), fact that
becomes very convenient when outside is -20. 2. Consider yourself lucky again for the fact that the
rent is around 200 euros and so you don’t have to rent the very expensive (and faraway)
apartments you find in Moscow. Still the rent is quite expensive when compared to that regular
students pay which is some 70 euros. 3. Yes, the dormitory was built when the Soviet Union was
still there and no major renovation seems to have been done since then. 4. My biggest fear: the
possibility of a fire, but fortunately my room is on the ground floor and so I can jump out of the
window in case of emergency. 5. The rooms are not only populated by students but also by
numerous cockroaches that populate the kitchen and that come out in the dark of the night. I would
say that you adapt to that life in the end. 6. The fact of having a roommate may be a disadvantage
for the privacy of your life. However, in the long dark month of Russian winter it may really help to
always have someone to speak with when you get back to the dormitory. 7. The problem of tap
water: some friends managed to have very big bottles of water delivered to the dormitory, but my
roommate and me just kept buying and carrying by hand those 5 liters bottles you can buy at the
supermarket. 8. Lastly, I have not considered living in the periphery of Moscow as a disadvantage,
but rather as a plus because you can better understand the daily life of Russians rather than only
seeing the touristic side of the city. In effect, the dorm’s neighborhood is full of Khrushchovki
(хрущёвки), the prefabricated apartment buildings built in the 60s to cope with a huge housing
shortage.

**Budget**
1. The cost of the rent for the double room at the dormitory is some 180 euros per month. 2. You
will spend on food around 350 euros per month, including some coffees in the city center.
However, this figure really depends on your habits. 3. Then you will have to pay for the flights to
and from Russia. 4. Add the cost of the insurance. 5. Traveling in Russia is not so expensive.
However, you you want to travel frequently you will have to devote an important part of your budget
to it. 6. Transportation in Moscow is extremely cheap, but if you go often to the city center it may
amount to some 50 euros a month.

**Food**
1. Food is extremely cheap. 2. However, a definite Russian cuisine does not exist with the
exception of cakes. What you will find in the canteen (stolovaia) are dishes coming from different
culinary traditions, especially Central Asian cuisine as most of the canteen personnel comes from
there. 3. Try the plof, a tasty rice served with meat and vegetables and typical of Uzbekistan. 4.
You will find a lot of meat served at stolovaia, usually steaks with some cheese on top. Personally I
was not a fan of them, but they say that for Russian winter you need to eat enough calories. 5. In
the evening my roommate and me usually cooked by ourselves in the dorm, most times pasta. 6.
Unfortunately coffee is as expensive as in France and it doesn't taste so good.
Safety
Moscow is characterized by very tight security everywhere. In the metro there are metal detectors and scanner which are actually not used to check every passenger, but to scan suspect individuals or bags. In the big malls you will find metal detectors as well. I must say that I have always felt quite safe even when walking alone at night in empty streets.

A foreign currency: the ruble
Remember that Russia uses the ruble as currency. This means that you will have to exchange euros into rubles either by withdrawing money from the ATMs or exchanging cash at banks. You can also pay by credit card but pay attention to the commissions your bank charges you for these operations. In my case they were high and I preferred changing money at the bank counters. Expect the value of the ruble to fluctuate if political shocks will persist also in the future. This year the ruble depreciated in respect to the euro in April. That was a little bit unfortunate because I had already made the big payment for the dormitory and I could have saved some money if the depreciation had happened a month before.

Transport
Moscow transport network is good and efficient. The metro is very quick also because there are less stations per line than in Paris. However, this also means that sometimes stations are extremely far from one another, sometimes even 5 km. If you find yourself living in between two stations then you may be obliged to walk long distances. MGIMO is located between the stations Prospekt Vernadskog and Yugo Zapadnaya. By foot it takes some 25 minutes to reach the metro. If you don’t want to walk, there are buses. The cost of a ticket for the metro or the bus is 36 rubles with the Troika card that I suggest you to make. Also taxis are extremely cheap compared to France. The best way to economize and not to have to hardly bargain the price with the taxi driver is to order the taxi by an app. The main apps are Yandex, Get taxi and also Uber. A one hour long drive from MGIMO to the airport (Sheremetevo or Domodedovo) costs around 1000 rubles.

Discovering Moscow
I have just said that Moscow is not everything in Russia. However, Moscow is an incredible metropolis and will represent a fundamental part of your experience. In this city you will be able to grasp the essence of the short twentieth century. So take your time to discover the hundreds of attractions it offers ranging from museums, to parks, to monuments, to Soviet buildings. I will give you just one suggestion on a must-see: VDNK. This is the park where there was the permanent Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy during Soviet times. Now many pavilions are empty, some host temporary exhibitions, in some others you will find some shops. What is interesting and unique about this park is its architecture so full of political symbols. It will help you reflect on what the “Age of Extremes” with its ideologies represented for the world.

Weather
It was a very warm day towards the end of August when I left Italy for Russia. It was 30°C and summer, but I was already worrying about winter and my unpreparedness for it. Throughout summer I had tried to buy many “materials” to prepare for the -20°C I had never experienced in my life. The first time it snowed was in late October. Never in my life I had experienced snow so early in the year. However, till December it snows frequently but snow does not accumulate on the ground as it melts due to the above 0°C temperatures. Winter is not only snow and ice, but also cold. There is a saying which well explains the nature of Russian winter: “There are two winters in Russia: a green and a white one”. I completely agree as cold temperatures arrive well before snow accumulates on the ground. From my experience what we could consider winter according to French temperatures starts in late October. Nonetheless you get used to it and in the end is not so
bad. The first time it snowed was in late October. Never in my life I had experienced snow so early in the year. However, till December it snows frequently but snow does not accumulate on the ground as it melts due to the above 0°C temperatures. Winter is not only snow and ice, but also cold. There is a saying which well explains the nature of Russian winter: “There are two winters in Russia: a green and a white one”. I completely agree as cold temperatures arrive well before snow accumulates on the ground. From my experience what we could consider winter according to French temperatures starts in late October. Nonetheless you get used to it and in the end it is not so bad. I have come to appreciate more snow than rain as snow doesn’t make you wet. Coming to the social consequences of winter, You do not see many people around when it is -20°C. A suggestion to cope with the Russian winter: don’t be lazy because of the bad weather. Don’t postpone things thinking that you will have time to go to that museum later in the year. In the end, you will not have the time to go and that is my case now. A little note: last December was the darkest month ever recorded in Moscow. During the entire month just there was sunshine just for 6 minutes. This is not to scare you because in the end you adapt to the fact that seeing the sun is a rare luck in Russian, but you must get prepared for long weeks of cloudy, snowy, freezing weather. You will see how these weather conditions with very little natural light deeply influence the habits of people who spend much more time in shopping centers and cafes. Once again, with the appropriate equipment the freezing temperatures are not unbearable, don’t let them influence your will of exploring Moscow!

**Traveling in Russia**

Always remember that Moscow is just a little part of Russia. So try to travel! I would highly advise you to do some travels in less touristic cities. Unfortunately, I personally didn’t travel much and I’m regretting it.

My only travel out of Moscow took place in March when I went to Voronezh and, then, to Rossosh, two cities that interested me for their relationship with the Second World War. My itinerary was the following: night train in 3rd class from Moscow to Voronezh. One day and a half in this city, which was and partially still is an industrial core of Russia. There I visited some sites linked to the fight between Germans and Soviet troops (picture on the next page). Then I went to Rossosh by train. In the small city were located the headquarters of the Italian army during the war. One day I visited the countryside looking for traces of the battles that took place along the Don river. The day after by car I went through the itinerary the Italian troops followed during the tragic retreat at -40 degrees. Then I came back to Moscow by night train.

It was a very emotional travel and one which allowed me to understand how Russians live out of Moscow.
Supermarkets

There are some supermarkets, though not very big, that are at 10/15 minutes walking distance from the dorm. The fact that they are not distant becomes very relevant in winter when you still have to carry heavy bottles of water. Below you will find a map of MGIMO neighborhood with indicated the closest supermarkets to the dorm.