Student Dispatch: A note from Kazan, Russia

Not many people in the US have heard of Kazan. Though it has over 1 million people, making it the 8th largest city in Russia, and though it is known locally as Russia's Third Capital, when I tell people I'm going to Kazan, Tatarstan, all they can say is “Bring back some of that Tartar sauce.” But as I go into some detail about the city beyond the sauce, I have been consistently asked about one thing; what it is like living in a part of Russia that is predominantly Sunni Muslim. This summer, I am spending two months in the capital of Tatarstan with the Critical Language Scholarship program. Me and 26 other students of Russian from across the US are taking classes, living with host families and going on weekly excursions around the area in an attempt to better understand Russian language and culture. But my stay in Kazan has given me so much more. In the month and a half that I have been here, I have greatly improved my Russian language abilities and come to better understanding of a country I have only read about. I have also learned about a culture I had barely heard of, and a religion that in the US is most commonly associated with extremism and the Middle East.

When I arrived at orientation in Washington, D.C, I quickly realized that I was the youngest person in the group. With this knowledge, my confidence turned to fear as we began our long journey to Kazan, which is located about 800 km East of Moscow. When we arrived at the airport exhausted and anxious, we were sent with teachers and host parents to our new families, about whom we only knew a name and address. When I got to my apartment, I met Nail, a 23 year old recent college graduate and programmer. His mother Sufya returned from work shortly thereafter, and in traditional Russian fashion sat me down with the false pretenses of a cup of tea, which in actuality turned into a meal made mostly of desserts. After a few minutes of small talk and introductions, Sufya and Nail assessed my level of Russian and reduced their pace accordingly. This was, after all, my first full conversation in Russian with people who were not able to switch to English when I didn't understand something. For this reason we kept to small talk as I eased into my surroundings.

As the days went by, the details of my environment began to come into focus, and I began to realize that I was not going to get the “Russian” experience I had expected. First it was the food. My host mother would feed me delicious dishes with funny sounding names like Qort and Chak-Chak, names and tastes that somehow just didn't seem exactly, well, Russian. Next was the tale of Tatarstan with the Critical Language Scholarship program.
be like the Muslim Arab families I see on TV, hear about on the radio and read about in the paper. I had so many questions, but held off until my host mother brought up her faith later that week. "I am a Muslim," she said "and Nail is a Muslim too. We work a lot so we don't go to the Mosque like we should, and we drink a little, but we are still Muslims." She went on to say how much she loves to read the Koran translated into Tatar, and that her faith has been important to her her whole life. When I told her I had barely realized, she was not surprised, saying that in many ways Tatars and Russians have melded together in Kazan, creating a peaceful and multicultural community. Sure there are still some Tatar areas and some Russian areas, but when it's all said and done, Sufya's closest friends are Russian. And this is the general feeling I get from Russian and Tatars alike. They know the difference, and can tell the difference, but in general don't seem to mind. In the Kazan Kremlin, Russians and Tatars take great pride in both their Orthodox Church and Mosque, which in my opinion exemplifies more than tolerance, but true multiculturalism, which has made Kazan a generally peaceful city. But on Thursday, July 19th, the peace in Kazan was disturbed. One Mufti was shot and killed and another seriously injured by a car bomb in the city center. Both of these men had taken some criticism for their stances against Islamic extremism in Chechnya and the Arab world. Though there have been disputes as to the reason for the attacks, from what I have heard from my host mother, the general reaction has been fear, not of being attacked, but of being stigmatized. She loves the community she lives in, and the friends she has both Russian and Tatar, and I have come to love what this city represents. Hopefully this was an isolated incident, because the kind of unity I have experienced in Kazan is not built overnight, and is something that must be valued, replicated and protected.

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