

## Moscow Free Speakers club celebrates freedom of speech.

# From Glasnost to Russia Today

What is the first thing that comes to mind when someone mentions Russia to you? I bet it is something like “*Perestroika*,” “domed buildings covered with snow” or colorful nesting dolls. While all of those things exist in my country, there is also another truth: Toastmasters in Russia! Picture a group of positive, goal-oriented people holding bi-weekly meetings all year round, speaking English to each other, presenting high-quality speeches and mentoring each other. I belong to the only English-speaking Toastmasters club in the biggest country in the world.

### Long, Long Ago

Let’s travel back to the stormy Moscow of the late 1980s to see how this story started. You might remember that the period from the late ’80s to the early ’90s were years of great change in the world. The Iron Curtain that kept capitalist and communist camps apart was gradually lifting; for Russia it was a full-scale revolution.

In the middle of these uncertain times, in a country that was brimming with energy and ideas, three Toastmasters club “babies” were born. Robert Meyerson, an American, fathered two of the clubs, including the very first one, which was started in one of the most open-minded universities in the country, at Lomonosov Moscow State university. One of the club members

was Gennady Gerasimov, Mikhail Gorbachev’s foreign ministry spokesman; he helped start the second “child” at another university, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

### And Then There Was One

The chaotic Moscow of the early ’90s proved challenging for Toastmasters, and only one club managed to survive – the youngest one. Its name was just the right fit for the times: Moscow Free Speakers (MFS). Meyerson says, “There was not yet freedom of speech in Russia, but I was giving the club members back then a goal to aim for and a title that would remind each member of that goal, no matter how difficult or how far away it seemed.”

For 15 years, the only surviving Toastmasters club in Russia took its time to develop and grow. In the past few years, our club’s more noticeable increase in size has been marked by the awards it has received: MFS was a Select Distinguished club in 2007-2008 and earned President’s Distinguished status in 2009-2010.

The club’s 2009-2010 president, Valeria Kholodkova, has been one of the most important contributors to its success. “I loved the club from the first meeting, and I wanted to make MFS a more interesting and joyful place to visit and join,” says Kholodkova.

Noting that it is the sole English-language club in the country, she

says MFS needs to be the “best example of the Toastmasters community in Russia.” Despite the club’s success, Kholodkova has even higher expectations for the future. “I am sure that this year will be more successful, and we will continue to grow higher and hopefully spread wider in our country,” she says.

### Speaking Freely Then and Now

Moscow Free Speakers currently has 45 members and is regularly full of guests wishing to join or at least catch a glimpse of the life of the club. The language of the meetings is strictly English, so people from different countries and nations are able to participate and be a part of the community.

“In this club I make new friends from different countries who speak the same language – English!” says member Syahnaz Akhtar Mat Ali, who came to work in Moscow from Malaysia. “Moscow Free Speakers is the club that makes me feel at home, because of its friendly environment.”

Club members range in age from 20 to 80, in occupations from students to business professionals and scientists. And what talented members we have! They don’t just rest on their laurels, but compete and even set the pace for the younger members.

“I was amazed to see rather senior people being so involved, active and creative in their presenta-



Moscow Free Speakers, the only English-speaking Toastmasters club in Russia, earned President's Distinguished status in 2009-2010.

tions,” says Dmitry Chebotarevsky, an active new member. “The more I attended club meetings, the bigger my respect grew for those experienced members; for their dedication, open-mindedness and energy.”

An excellent example is Professor Henry Norman, who has been a club member since 1994. Norman knew from the start that the Moscow Free Speakers would help him – including boosting his career in science. “My impression was definitely favorable. I understood and appreciated the club’s learn-by-doing system,” he says. “I improved my public speaking skills remarkably and applied them at scientific conferences, meetings, negotiations and banquets. My speaking skills in private communications became much better as well. My writing skills became better too.”

Norman didn’t stop at developing himself; he also shares his experience with the young scientists of his team. “My public speaking skills help me to increase both my income and the income of my young collaborators,” he says. “I do my best to increase their public speaking skills in both English and Russian.”

Another distinguished club member is Alla Oganova, who joined

Toastmasters in 1998. Oganova is an English teacher at one of the Law Institutes in Moscow, and she uses her Toastmasters experience in her professional life.

### Club Benefits Continue

To benefit from the club, you don’t have to be a member for a long time. Oleg Petrov, a new member and a project manager in informa-

tion technology and telecommunications, found that being active in the club helped him “arrange and clean up not only my speech, but also my mind when taking part in business and private meetings, especially within a large group of people. Moreover, our Toastmasters projects help to improve another crucial skill – time management.”

Members gain a broad set of useful skills and ideas for work, but that is not the only thing that

attracts people to the club. It’s also about how people feel about themselves and how they are treated. “I’m in the place where I want to be, where I can express myself,” says Maxim Tsvetov, one of the most active young club members.

Now, in 2011, adjusting to the pace of Moscow life, our club has quickly become known as a vibrant and dynamic place with a highly

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positive atmosphere and an irresistible desire to grow within the country. And I am happy to tell you, fellow Toastmasters, that even in snowy Russia you will always find a warm place to come, speak and feel at home. ■

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