

Siberian 'academic city' eyes return to Soviet glory

July 6 2012, by Eleonore Dermey

It was once one of the most prestigious places to live in the whole Soviet Union, with good salaries, an idyllic waterfront and away from the prying eyes of the secret services.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Akademgorodok -- a highbrow town outside Siberia's main city of Novosibirsk, created in the 1950s for academics to live and work -- fell on hard times.

But now Akademgorodok, which means 'little academic town' in Russian, is hoping to stage a remarkable turn of fortunes by becoming a centre for [Kremlin](#)-backed efforts to spearhead the rebirth of innovation in Russia.

Sitting amid pine woods on the edge of the man-made Ob reservoir, it now hosts a number of high-tech start-ups and earned the nickname "Silicon Forest".

The symbol of the revival is a gigantic orange building with a futurist look that now dominates the scene in the peaceful town created in 1957 on the orders of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

The building -- which stands in stark contrast to the crumbling Soviet-era edifices around it -- houses a number of innovation-based firms specialised in bio and [nanotechnology](#).

"Akademgorodok is the trailblazer of science in Siberia," said Vassily

Fomin, deputy head of the Siberian department of the [Russian Academy of Sciences](#).

The town was hit hard by the collapse of the [Soviet Union](#) which caused funds to dry up and sparked an inevitable [brain drain](#), with the best minds heading abroad. But now, according to Fomin, things are picking up.

"We survived back then, thanks to help from foreign academics. They gave us grants, they signed contracts with us and joined us up with various programmes," he said.

"We learned how to work effectively, to have responsibilities, to edit and properly present the results of our research and to fight to get grants."

And after a few years a "new demand for scientific research" became evident in Russia as the country started to enjoy economic growth.

-- 'We have come through it' --

The Russian authorities -- belatedly seeing the need to modernise to catch up with Western and Asian economies -- started to cautiously improve financing and give Akademgorodok the chance of a new lease of life.

"We have come through it, we are there and we will continue to work," said Fomin.

Seeking to wean the economy off its dependence on oil exports, the Russian authorities have sought to refocus on innovation and technology that lay forgotten in the chaos and cynicism after the Soviet collapse.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has made the Moscow suburb of

Skolkovo the hub of Russia's innovation drive, but the effects of the change in attitude can also be felt in Akademgorodok.

The town now hosts high-tech [start-ups](#) like globally successful games producer Alawar Entertainment.

"In the last years we have felt a certain return to science," said Pavel Kostrikov, a former researcher who now works in the exhibition centre in Akademgorodok.

"Before, students did their studies and, once they got their degrees, they left for the West. Now many are staying here as the salaries in the universities are getting better and they are given accommodation."

Marking out his words, several new buildings are being constructed in the city.

However the sense of relative optimism in Akademgorodok is not necessarily felt across Russia, with the brain drain estimated at levels up to 20 percent in areas like biology.

"Here, the situation is considerably better than elsewhere in Russia," said Kostrikov. "The most important thing is that a positive dynamic is retained."

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