

# A trip to Moscow – in the service of people’s diplomacy

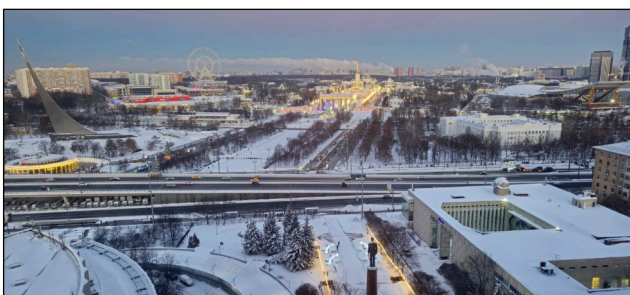
by Anita Meyenberger

*The Eurasia Association invited “upright Swiss citizens” to Moscow on a dialogue trip for peace to engage in diplomacy from a citizen’s perspective. On 24 January, the participants met at Kloten Airport near Zurich to begin their journey. Tickets from “Turkish Airlines” for the flight via Istanbul to Moscow, an electronic visa for Russia, hotel reservations and a metro card provided the material requirements for the trip – the participants felt the costs were worth it. Roubles could only be purchased in Moscow.*

Tour guide *Vital Burger*, president of the Swiss Eurasia Association, spared no effort to realise the travel group’s goal: to dispel the bad spirits between the peoples of Switzerland and Russia. In his luggage, he carried large and small cowbells, the Trychels, a banner with the Swiss and Russian coats of arms and the inscription “Friendship with Russia” in Russian, German, French, Italian and Romansh, as well as many white “Sennechutteli” [traditional alpine dairymen’s shirts] with the inscription “Freundschaftstrychler Schweiz” [Friendship Cowbells Switzerland]. In Switzerland, the Trychels are used to drive away winter or evil spirits. The aim was to send a signal to Russia to, as Vital Burger put it, “abandon the path of unspeakable sanctions and work constructively to improve relations between our peoples. [...] Let’s put the house of Eurasia back in order.”

## A warm welcome

From Vnukovo Airport, the group travelled by bus through Moscow by night to their hotel, passing



Moscow – a modern metropolis. (All pictures are)



Snow-covered Red Square seen from St. Basil’s Cathedral.

the brightly lit Bolshoi Theatre, the Kremlin and streets and bridges decorated for Christmas. The next morning, the cowbells rang out for the first time in the hotel to welcome a group of Muscovites in their festive Russian costumes. They welcomed the Swiss tour group with a traditional Russian ceremony: they offered salt as a symbol of frugality and peace and invited them to break the bread that was also offered and sprinkle it with salt as a sign of lifelong friendship. The joint dance to the sounds of Russian folk music also had a unifying effect.

## Visit to the Swiss Embassy

On 26 January, the Swiss tour group had the opportunity to personally meet the Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation in Moscow, *Jürg Burri*. Like 31 other newly appointed ambassadors, he had presented his credentials to Russian President *Vladimir Putin* on 15 January 2026. The cow-



The “Freundschaftstrychler” arrive in front of the Swiss Embassy.

bells were also used before the meeting with Mr Burri: strong women and men carried them through the streets from the Chistye Prudy metro station to the Swiss Embassy on Per. Ogorodnaya Sloboda in the bitter cold. Astonished and delighted Muscovite passers-by could be seen watching.

Mr Burri received the delegation at his residence. He explained his working methods and the duties of an ambassador. The participants then had the opportunity to present their concerns to him – essentially the revival of dialogue between Russia and Switzerland and the strengthening of Swiss neutrality. This was also made clear in a letter that one of the participants read aloud and presented to the ambassador (see box).

Ambassador Burri later stated that his staff were not there to judge, but to listen – an attitude that certainly contributes to understanding. The fact that he welcomed his Swiss compatriots and engaged in an open dialogue with them was greatly appreciated by the tour group participants.

It is hardly surprising that the ambassador did not agree with the visitors on all points, but it

*Honourable Ambassador Burri*

We stand here as representatives of a group of the Swiss population that takes neutrality seriously. This means a willingness to treat both parties in conflict situations with respect, to listen to their concerns and wishes, and to seek ways of reaching more understanding.

We are convinced that the Russian people are an integral part of the European community and must not be excluded from it. Our group recognises the efforts of the Russian leadership, from Mr Gorbachev to Mr Putin, to establish a stable, pan-European peace order and deeply regrets that these efforts have not yet been successful.

We now hope that those responsible for Russia's fate will not give up hope for détente and for a new beginning based on solidarity. We kindly ask you, Mr Ambassador, to contribute to this as far as possible.

We wish you a happy time in Moscow.

*Moscow, 26 January.*

*The Delegation of the Eurasia Association*

was a peaceful, respectful exchange – something that is particularly valuable in today's world.

### **Listening to and taking the "other side" seriously**

Participants reported that the cultural and historical highlights of the week included attending a ballet performance for children in the concert hall of the State Kremlin Palace, guided tours of the "State Tretyakov Gallery" and the "Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War". The visitors were also impressed by their tour around a branch of "EkoNiva", the largest raw milk producer in the Russian Federation and Europe, where a Swiss national holds a senior position.

The participants had the opportunity to attend informative seminars. The evening with *Vladimir Kotenev*, former chargé d'affaires at the Russian Embassy in Bern from 1997 to 2001 and former Russian ambassador to Berlin from 2004 to 2010, provided in-depth insights into the history of the current political situation from a Russian perspective.

The week-long trip reinforced the participants' attitude that in conflict situations, both sides must always be heard and taken seriously. Only then can a path to peace be found again.

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*



The visitors were impressed by the presentation given by Swiss national Ramon Schenk, who is responsible for all production at "EkoNiva", the largest raw milk producer in the Russian Federation and Europe.