The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Taste of Russian Bureaucracy in a Stuck Elevator

By Michele A. Berdy

August 25, 2011



Ваш лифт не сдан: your elevator hasn't been certified for service

In an old Soviet joke, a hare runs for his life in the forest. A bear asks him why he's running, and the hare says that camels are being caught and shoed. Bewildered, the bear points out that the hare isn't a camel. The hare replies: Поймают, подкуют, а потом доказывай, что ты не верблюд (They'll catch you and put shoes on you, and then go and try to prove that you're not a camel).

Today доказывай, что ты не верблюд (prove that you're not a camel) is used any time you can't prove something obvious to an obstinate bureaucracy.

For example — that you have an elevator.

You see, this year municipal funds were allocated to replace old elevators, including the one in

my apartment building. Cool. Your tax rubles at work, right?

Installation began in May. True, the installers — three migrant workers in flip-flops — didn't immediately inspire confidence. But appearances can be deceiving. All those nuts and bolts spread out on the floor were eventually put in place, and after a month of trudging up six flights of stairs, the elevator was installed.

The workers left. But the elevator wasn't turned on. We were told: Нужно сначала его сдать приёмной комиссии (First you must have it certified by an inspections board). Sounds sensible, right? I moved out to the dacha and gave over my apartment to a friend, whose rental was being remodeled.

We waited for the inspectors. And trudged up six flights of stairs. And waited. And trudged.

A month later, the elevator was turned on. True, it went out of service every other day. But sometimes it worked. ⊠

Then disaster struck. On Saturday night my friend came home late, got into the elevator, and ascended quietly to the sixth floor. The elevator stopped. The doors didn't open. After pushing buttons and pounding, he pushed the emergency button. A cranky woman replied: Чего у вас? (What's the matter?) He replied. She screamed back: Ничего не слышу! (I can't hear anything!)

This comedy went on for a while until my friend identified the problem: There was no microphone in the elevator.

Somewhat stunned by the irony of an emergency communications system without a microphone, my friend went back to pounding and pushing buttons. Finally, the door loosened enough for him to wedge in his hand and pry the doors open. My cheerfully drunk neighbors, drawn by the commotion, ran downstairs to push another emergency button. That didn't alert the dispatcher, but it did set off a loud buzzing.

The buzzing went on all Saturday night and all Sunday. On Monday, my friend called the dispatcher, who refused to do anything because — wait for it — Ваш лифт не сдан. Он для нас не существует (Your elevator hasn't been certified. It doesn't exist for us.)

So then he called управляющая компания (the management company), where he was told: Ваш лифт не сдан. Мы за него не отвечаем. (Your elevator hasn't been certified. We're not responsible for it.) In desperation, he called the manufacturer, but — you got it — Ваш лифт не сдан. Нет контракта по обслуживанию. (Your elevator hasn't been certified. There's no service contract.)

Our nonexistent elevator has been buzzing for five days and nights. And we can't figure out how to convince the bureaucrats that it's not a camel — it's an elevator.

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/08/25/taste-of-russian-bureaucracy-in-a-stuck-elevator-a9151