

City Hall Mulls Taxing Doubles of Tsars, Soviet Leaders

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A double of Tsar Nicholas II with a note showing that he's not psychotic. **Lena Smirnova**

Tsar Nicholas II carries around a doctor's note that states he's not psychotic. Upon request, he also retrieves, from the inside pocket of his blue military uniform, a passport, veteran's card and a certificate to prove that he is registered as a sole proprietor.

This scene, witnessed on Red Square, may make passersby stare, but for the tsar's impersonator, Viktor Chepkasov, it is a daily chore and something he is not likely to smile about.

"Always, everywhere I am packed with documents. I have everything covered and nothing works," Chepkasov said in exasperation Saturday as he was shooed off Red Square by a policeman.

Moscow's department of trade and services is now considering legalizing street artists,

including impersonators, by making them get patents. According to the proposal, patented artists would be allowed to work in a set city area and would need to pay around 6 percent of their expected income as taxes. But while the impersonators have made numerous appeals to authorities to give them an effective license, they are unhappy with the form this long-awaited reform is taking.

The Kremlin's Iberian Gate mid-day Saturday was bursting with doubles of historical Russian leaders and policemen who kept a close eye on them. Some held listening devices and big photo cameras.

Chepkasov's Nicholas II, who proudly stated that he is a member of the United Russia party, happily greeted all passing policemen by name and offered them free photos. On the side, Sergei Solovyev's Lenin shouted out communist slogans and Putin, a Kazakh in a puffy winter jacket, paced around a stool and drank tea from a mug.

Chepkasov and Solovyev, who has been unofficially elected Moscow's primary Lenin double by other impersonators of the Soviet leader, have spent numerous hours being chased by the police and in detention at police stations. Though the two historical figures have recently had a brawl and no longer speak to each other, they agree that the new patent will not protect them.

"It is just another piece of paper! It won't do anything," Solovyev shouted from his working zone near the Iberian Gate.

Now to make their work legal, artists have to register as sole proprietors and pay 6 percent of their earnings as taxes, said Anton Yeremeyev, lawyer at the Nadmitov, Ivanov and Partners firm.

The earnings can be fairly substantial judging by the impersonators' barter with potential clients.

Putin's double charges 1,000 rubles (\$31) and up for a picture, although he was willing to give a 50-percent discount in light of the economic crisis and the journalist's female gender. A picture with Lenin is about 300 rubles and Nicholas II takes a modest 100 rubles for a picture as well as a gentlemanly peck on the hand if the customer is a woman.

Not all impersonators are registered as sole proprietors — which doesn't even provide a category for such type of work — and not all those who do have licenses declare their income. According to other impersonators, Putin's double has managed to buy an apartment in Moscow for the money he collected since coming into the business eight years ago, and he doesn't pay any taxes.

The proposed patent system could be an easier alternative for those who want to work legally, Yeremeyev said.

"This is a kind of compromise in which it is no longer necessary for the taxpayer to hide some of his income since he has already paid all his taxes by acquiring a patent," Yeremeyev said. "A plus for the government is that, despite the tax privileges, if everyone acquires patents, taxes will be paid by all those who previously did not do this at all."

But impersonators are upset that the patent will put another tax on them. Solovyev has registered as a sole proprietor and pays 6 percent of his earnings as taxes to maintain the document. Unless the patent replaces the entrepreneurial license, it would double these payments.

"Paying for the same activity twice doesn't make sense," Solovyev said, adding that he now uses the money he earns as Lenin to cover his car insurance.

Chepkasov said that he has a license but doesn't pay the fees because he earns too little. He added that he has dressed up as Nicholas II to promote patriotic feelings among passersby rather than to earn money.

"I don't need money," he said. "I work for the motherland. I get a pension, you know."

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