The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Moscow Minute

By Michele A. Berdy

June 04, 2015



Без пяти́ мину́т: five minutes short (of becoming something)

When is a minute not a minute? Generally, with almost every Russian expression using the word минута (minute). In common usage, минута ranges in duration from an instant to a couple of months.

Take the phrase в одну минуту (in one minute), which always means a very short period of time, or what someone says is a very short period of time: Хочешь, я тебя в одну минуту вылечу от твоей аллергии? (Want me to cure you of your allergies in a minute?)

The phrase одну минуту (just a minute) is also rather elastic. Shouted with the verb подождать (to wait) left out, it's a second or two: Одну минуту! (Wait a sec!). But shouted by your significant other who is watching a football match on television, it might mean an hour: "Одну минуту! Сейчас, сейчас!" ("Just a minute! I'll be right there!")

On the other hand, сию минуту (right this instant) is so soon it's yesterday: Я хочу отчёт не через десять, а сию минуту! (I don't want that report in ten minutes, I want it right this second!) When the person demanding immediate action is a boss, parent, or other authority figure, you might want to hop to it. Он потребовал у кого-то сию же минуту прислать машину, что и исполнилось, действительно, в одну минуту. (He demanded that someone send a car right this minute, which was done, literally, in one minute.)

Russian minutes can also be first or good. В первую минуту (literally, in the first minute) just means "at the beginning" — for the first short period of time: Я её в первую минуту не узнал, отвернулся, потом вдруг до меня дошло. (I didn't recognize her at first, but as I turned away, I suddenly realized who she was.) В добрую минуту (literally, in a good minute) means at a good time, usually when someone is well disposed to a request. Однажды мне даже удалось в добрую минуту выпросить у него рубль. (Once I even picked the right moment to ask him for a ruble.)

Без пяти минут (literally, without five minutes) is used to describe someone on the verge of some achievement, usually a job, title or license. Here the five minutes might actually be six months. Митя — студент последнего курса мединститута, без пяти минут врач. (Mitya is in his final year at medical school, just about to become a doctor — literally, "five minutes short of being a doctor").

Зайди на минуточку (Stop in for a minute) might not stretch to six months, but if the invitation is at home after work, it might start with tea and end at 4 a.m.

And then there's a curious Russian minute. When на минуточку is set off by commas, it means "by the way" or "and don't forget" — as if the speaker were asking you to pause for a minute and consider. Главный колокол весил, на минуточку, тысяча сто пятьдесят девять пудов (The main bell weighed — if you can believe it — over 40,000 pounds.) Лекарству, на минуточку, триста лет (That medicine is — hold on — 300 years old.)

So how does a московская минута (Moscow minute) stack up to a New York minute? The joke is that a New York minute is the time between a traffic light turning green and the cabbie behind you honking. By that definition, a Moscow minute is a nanosecond.

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

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/06/04/a-moscow-minute-a47145