The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Pamela Anderson Main Attraction at Russia's Far East Forum

By Howard Amos

September 03, 2015



Pamela Anderson

The first day of a new economic forum in Russia's far eastern city of Vladivostok designed to showcase the region was dominated Thursday by Hollywood celebrity Pamela Anderson, who visited a lion injured in recent flooding and expressed her admiration for Russia as a country of "strong leaders."

Anderson, an actress who heads her own charity dedicated to campaigning on ecological and animal cruelty issues, came to the event at the invitation of Russian Natural Resources Minister Sergei Donskoi.

"I wanted to visit this country because there are many strong leaders, I wanted to come here to talk about ecological problems so that it will lead to massive changes," Anderson said after a meeting with Donskoi, news agency RIA Novosti reported.

The Kremlin created the annual Eastern Economic Forum in May, and President Vladimir Putin is due to address the gathering of Russian and Asian businessmen Friday.

Putin has lauded Russia's "pivot to the East" in the wake of deteriorating relations with Western countries over the Ukraine crisis, but experts warn political rhetoric has yet to lead to substantive economic change. Despite investment and talk about development, Russia's Far East remains little more than a transit zone for raw materials shipped to neighboring countries.

Trade volumes with China, the region's economic powerhouse with which Russia shares a 4,000-kilometer border, even dropped 28.7 percent in the first six months of this year.

"The size of investment [in the Far East] is far too small if Russia is looking to draw closer to the Asia Pacific region," said Alexei Skopin, an expert on regional politics at Moscow's Higher School of Economics.

Stealing the Spotlight

As well as a meeting with Donskoi, Anderson also visited a rehabilitation center for tigers and leopards that live in the region and dropped in to see a lion that was airlifted from the town of Ussuriisk, 100 kilometers north of Vladivostok, when it suffered severe flooding last week.

"It's an honor to be in Russia, where Leo Tolstoy put animal rights on the minds of the world," Anderson wrote on Instagram.

See also: Pamela Anderson in Russia — The Highlights

The movements of the U.S. celebrity, best known for her role in the L.A.-based lifeguards series "Baywatch" that was also popular in Russia, were closely followed by Russian media, with state-owned television channel Vesti.ru including her Thursday in a list of prominent Western musicians and actors who have declared their admiration for Russia.

"Western celebrities admit their love for Russia despite the efforts of Western media to paint a negative picture of the country," Vesti.ru wrote.

Donskoi presented Anderson with a model of a polar bear, for which Anderson thanked him with a kiss on the cheek, television channel Ren-TV reported.

At an evening charity auction in Vladivostok, a lifesaving float similar to those featured in "Baywatch" donated by Anderson was sold for 3 million rubles ($45,000).

> Pamela Anderson came to the Russian Easter Economic Forum to discuss environmental issues http://t.co/5tjuUVhjBS pic.twitter.com/tiUqWSxxjC
>
> — Siberian Times (@siberian_times) September 3, 2015

National Priority?

The showpiece forum is taking place on a university campus on Russky Island, which is linked

to the mainland by two giant bridges built for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 2012.

A total of 4.7 trillion rubles' ($70.4 billion) worth of contracts and agreements were being prepared for inking at the forum, Russia's Far East Development Minister Alexander Galushko has said. One of the most significant is a memorandum between state-owned gas giant Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation about increases to the supply of Russian pipeline gas to China via the Far East.

In recent years, Russia has appeared to focus resources and attention on the Far East in an attempt to boost its development — an effort that experts say has had mixed results.

The huge expanse of territory between Siberia and Russia's Pacific coast suffers acutely from decaying infrastructure, geographic isolation, extreme weather, a shrinking population and uncompetitive enterprises left over as relics of Soviet economic planning.

"The rise of Siberia and the Far East is our national priority for all of the 21st century," Putin said in an interview with the TASS news agency earlier this week. The Russian leader is scheduled to speak at the forum Friday after arriving in Vladivostok after a two-day trip to China.

There are reportedly 1,350 people taking part in the event from 24 countries, with Russians making up over half of the guests and businessmen from China, Japan and South Korea most of the rest.

Teething Problems

The event, however, appeared to get off to a bumpy start, with business newspaper Vedomosti reporting Thursday that delegates had difficulty obtaining official passes and that many of those seeking to attend had their applications turned down at the last minute.

Metals tycoon and billionaire Oleg Deripaska was due to speak at the forum Thursday but failed to show up at the last moment, the newspaper reported.

Experts say that the government's recent push to channel funds to the region has helped create some local areas of growth but failed to deepen the region's integration with the wider Asia-Pacific zone or turn Russia into a major economic force in the Far East.

"Can local points of growth be successful in a country that has very little investment?" said Natalya Zubarevich, director of the regional program of the Independent Institute for Social Policy think tank in Moscow, pointing out that investment rates in Russia have been falling for three years.

The Kremlin created a Ministry of Far Eastern Development in 2012 after Putin was re-elected to a third presidential term, but the first minister resigned after little over a year in the position.

Russia's Far East is "colonially integrated" to the Pacific area, said Zubarevich, because its main roles are as a generator of fish exports and as a transit zone for energy deliveries.

Official rhetoric about developing the region and "pivoting" to the East is belied by relatively low levels of new investment and declining trade volumes with China, according to Zubarevich.

"You have to separate the words and the money," she said.

Contact the author at h.amos@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/09/03/pamela-anderson-main-attraction-at-russias-far-east-forum-a49343