

Super Nannies: The Westerners Educating Russia's Rich Kids

Western nannies benefit from sky-high salaries and glimpses into the lives of the Russian elite.

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When John (not his real name) first arrived in Moscow to begin work as a private English teacher for an oligarch's family, he did not speak a word of Russian. "The farthest east of Britain I had been was Italy."

John was, however, more familiar with the lifestyles of the post-Soviet super-rich. Back home in rural England, he attended an elite boarding school alongside a Ukrainian classmate, who was regularly flown in by helicopter and paid his enormous school fees in cash.

Those childhood memories were at the front of his mind when he was driven to his new workplace — a marble-covered mansion in Barvikha, the Russian capital's most extravagant suburb. There, John was greeted by an English-speaking personal assistant and introduced to the compound's team of 30 staff.

John, 22, had joined the small army of — mostly British — live-in English tutors educating the Russian elite in Moscow's luxury suburbs. Known by the 19th-century term “governor” or “governess,” these young Westerners are given privileged, rare insights into the lives of Russian officials, businessmen and celebrities.

Despite deteriorating relations with the West and Russia's deepening financial crisis, the Russian elite has not abandoned its desire to educate its children abroad.

Before their offspring are old enough to be shipped off to private school in Britain, Switzerland or the United States, they must be prepared for life in the West by a full-time carer in Moscow.

English Please

Young Brits are highest in demand on Barvikha's estates. “They like the royalty about England,” says Jason Farrell, a former governor who set up Gouverneur International, a recruitment agency placing native English speakers in elite Russian families. Wealthy Russians, he says, want to be associated with the British aristocracy.

Glyn Taylor, managing director of London-based recruitment company Simply Angelic, says his Russian clients want governors to “encourage traditional British etiquette.”

Britain is also a less difficult proposition than the United States, both politically and geographically speaking. Unless Russians want to school their children in the United States, the default is to seek Brits to bring up their children.

“It's like importing a British person into your home,” says one “governess,” who insisted on speaking anonymously. Like many of her colleagues, she has signed a contract, which says she cannot reveal the details of the lives of her employers for seven years. She refuses to name who she works for but says Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is a regular guest at the Barvikha estate where she works.

Unthinkable Salaries

Governors only discuss the lives of their bosses among themselves. They form a sizable expat community in Moscow, and their hefty salaries mean they can afford to dine in the Russian capital's most expensive restaurants. There, they discuss the lives of their employers into the early hours of the morning. These include witnessing dramatic FSB raids, house arrests and traveling the world in private jets.

Money draws the young Brits to Russia. A governor in Moscow can earn up to £1,200 (\$1,560) a week, an unthinkable amount of cash for recent university graduates. “The most I've seen advertised is £800 (\$1,040) a day,” says John.

This makes the job very hard to leave. “You get addicted to the money very quickly,” says Emma, a governess who refused to give her last name. If they have the patience, governors stay in Moscow long enough to be able to afford a small house back in London.

Some decide to stay in Moscow to recruit Brits for rich families. “It’s the classic governor scenario,” says former governor James Alger. After working five years for oligarch families, he now calls himself an “education consultant” and earns a living by persuading friends in Britain to work in Moscow. He runs a company called EED (“Elite Educational Development”) with another former governor. Alger stumbled on the business idea when his employer’s friend paid him \$5,000 to find a governor for his son.

The Russian financial crisis has barely affected the demand for foreign nannies in Moscow. The recession may be hitting the average pocket hard, but in Barvikha, life has largely stayed the same. If anything, the crash of the ruble has made the life of foreign tutors, usually paid in British pounds, even more luxurious.

‘It Hardens You’

But working for Russia’s rich and powerful can be tough. “They make the rules and you are always wrong,” says John, adding that anybody with a low tolerance for stress would not last long in the job.

Adjusting to the demands of Russia’s wealthiest is the hardest part of the job. Governors, who either live on the same territory as their employer or are given an apartment nearby, are on call round the clock. Some are unable to cope. One governess escaped from her family at an airport. “She simply grabbed her bags and ran into a taxi,” says Emma.

Katherine (not her real name) says that she found “a family away from home” in Barvikha. “I was close to my oligarchs and kept their confidence,” she says. “The day after the great ruble crash, the father made us watch a Soviet film in which a rich father pretended to have lost his fortune and set his children to work,” she recalls.

Like many childcare employees, the tutors grow close with the children and find separation emotionally difficult. In many instances, families cut ties abruptly. One governor, who had spent three years bringing up a child, was told he was not needed anymore via a telephone call from a personal assistant.

“One day you’re part of the family, the next day you’re nothing to them,” says Emma, adding that the experience had “hardened” her.

At times, the job can also feel dangerous. Governors grow used to their employers carrying guns and the high level of security that surrounds them. “If there are any problems, the recruitment companies order a car and take you to a safe house,” says Emma. Many governors are put off coming to Russia by the very existence of a “safe house.”

Working with the rest of the staff is another difficulty governors face. Often only governors are invited to family dinners, and this can cause tension with the rest of the staff in Barvikha’s mansions. “The worst thing that can happen is for the nannies to find out how much you earn,” says John.

Temporarily an Oligarch

John was one of the lucky ones. He almost immediately befriended a security guard named Yury at the mansion in which he worked. “He would put down his guns to play football with me and the kid,” he says.

Searching through his phone, he shows photographs of super-yachts in the Caribbean, Saint-Tropez and the Maldives. “My employer could easily spend half a million dollars on a holiday,” he says. He goes on to tell boyish tales of driving expensive cars and snowmobiles in luxury French ski resorts. “When I first arrived in Moscow, they put me in a vintage car full of models and drove me around the Kremlin,” he says.

Unlike many of the governors, John is still in touch with the Russian boy he looked after for two years. “He’s in a boarding school in England, I’m really proud of him,” he says.

Asked if he would want the same for his children, John replies in the negative: “Absolutely not.”

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