The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Tales from the Trans-Siberian: Vasily, the Putin Impersonator

Moscow-Vladivostok, talking to the passenger in Seat 47.

By Mesto47/Marina Dmukhovskaya

June 08, 2020



Vasily **Georg Wallner**

Last summer journalist Marina Dmukhovskaya and photographer Georg Wallner took a trip on the Trans-Siberian from Moscow to Vladivostok. For 28 days and almost 10,000 kilometers, they talked to dozens of people in "Seat 47" (Mesto 47) riding next to them. When they returned, they turned 38 conversations into first-person stories.

Here is one of them.

I am from Novosibirsk. I was running my own fur business there for more than twenty years. One day I was having dinner with a little son of my friend and watching TV. I suddenly saw his chin drop and spoon fall out of his mouth. "Mommy, look, that's uncle Vasily!" Since then, when Putin became President for the first time, I became Putin. The nickname just stuck to

me forever. Many people in fur business didn't even know my real name.

During the first five years I would travel to Moscow three times a year for a performance or a show. And in 2015 my fur store burned down. Somebody set a shopping mall in Ekaterinburg on fire, and my business was in the middle of those unfortunate events. Along with fur, my millions of rubles, my whole capital burned down. When my business was ruined, life pushed me to Moscow. I started impersonating Putin on the Red Square and now making my living out of my similarity to Putin's looks.

For four years I worked on perfecting the role and closing down the gap with the real character. The way he walks is very simple, my appearance is similar, so is my height. I focused more on mimics, elocution, rhetoric. My mimics was originally similar too, but I perfected it to look exactly like Putin's.

When Putin got elected for the second term, I realized that I should take up this job full time and find a way to make money out of it. I started promoting myself and in 2006 I had my first big speech as the President at a birthday party of Ukrainian Rada Parliament member. They made it a show, I came to congratulate him to Yalta with a big car escort. He was told, "A high official would like to have a word with you". He comes out and has no clue what is going on. He couldn't figure out if it was a joke or if Putin really came. He was mad at his wife and ended up not talking to her for three days after the incident.

In fact I often get hired to congratulate people on different occasions. It costs 500 dollars, so only those people who can afford to pay this price get this service. I have congratulated high officials from politics or economy.

When people see me work at Red Square, they react in many different ways. Usually they are surprised. The Chinese are jumping with happiness: here is Putin, our friend. He must have done a lot for them, and they are cooperating a lot with Xi Jinping.

People often notice me on public transport as I commute in this suit from home to Red Square. Many people smile. Some react negatively. People, who are not pleased by Putin politics and his actions, wish me death and tell me to go to hell. They often ask me when I am going to leave the post. When I will raise their pension. They bring up those issues that trouble them the most. What can I reply? I never reply negatively, I always try to be positive. I am wishing them all well.

Many people ask me, "Why are you doing PR for Putin? Why are you promoting him? He has not done anything good for this country and its people." I say, "Only time will show what he has done and what he hasn't." I am not just an actor, I am more than that, as people associate me with Putin. Other actors play up to dozen roles, but they are not associated with the people they play. And I am and always will be an actor of one role.

I have two university degrees. Two secondary education certificates. Medical secondary education. Rehabilitation specialist. Teacher. Physical education. Economist. Finance manager. But I haven't applied any of my degrees into my daily work routine.

Normally I arrive to the Red Square by 11 and work there till 7 pm. Sometimes I can be there a bit earlier or later. I have unregulated working hours. I work together with Stalin, and we

became close friends. He's been working here much longer. Our work as impersonators comes in a very close contact with each other, as there are many Stalins on the Red Square, around six-seven of them, but he is the most realistic out of all of them. My Stalin colleague is originally from Turkey, he's had a tough life and he is illiterate. We are a cool team:Putin is very popular now, and Stalin is very popular too. He likes working with me, I enjoy working with him, and it's more fun working together.

Lately I decided it's time for me to quit. I have four kids. The oldest is 24 years old, the youngest is just three years old. They were living with me in Moscow, but in December left they for Novosibirsk and are now living with their grandmothers. I am constantly busy, and it got too tough for my wife here with the kids. This job does not satisfy me financially, it doesn't meet financial needs of my big family. I understand that my similarity to Putin is some sort of mission, but I don't really understand how to unveil its potential or whether I should just forget about it. Because during those years that I spent trying to carry my role with dignity and implement it somehow, I haven't found people who would be able to assist me with it.

This story was first published by Mesto47. You can read this or listen to a podcast on their site.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/08/tales-from-the-trans-siberian-vasily-the-putin-impersonator-a70516