

One day in the life of a Russian vendor

Selling the street paper with Vitaly, one of the homeless millions in an unforgiving landscape

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STREET NEWS SERVICE

One of four million homeless people in Russia, Vitaly Petrovich Shashlov is a vendor of street paper Put Domoi in St. Petersburg. He is 67 years old and has been selling the magazine for 12 years.

To know what a day in the life of a Russian street paper vendor is all about, I am spending a day with Vitaly in St. Petersburg. We meet at the Put Domoi distribution center, where Vitaly arrives with his iron cart and a rucksack. He looks at me suspiciously and is thinking for a long time before answering each question. He says he wants to make sure he says the right things. When I ask whether I can take pictures of him, he appears somewhat shy at first.

Thankfully, I manage to break the ice a few minutes later. Vitaly picks up several heavy packs of newspapers and realizes that he can't manage to put them all in his cart and rucksack. I offer to help, which he seems to appreciate. On our way to a tramway stop, he brightens up, but still does not want to speak much about himself. After a while, he opens up and tells me about his previous job as a street cleaner. He says he was proud of that job because he could do it regardless of his age. I see him off to go selling, and we agree to meet later at the Nevskiy Prospect tube station. While saying goodbye, he looks at me for a while and offers me a handshake.

At the meeting time, I search the area around the station but I can't find Vitaly. When I call him to find out where he is, he sounds a bit irritated and says he is in the station hall, but that he doesn't have time, before hanging up the phone. I take the stairs to the station hall when he rings me again, and tells me to go to the Vasileostrovskaya station instead to meet him.

As I arrive there, I see Vitaly stand proudly in the center of the hall talking to a young person, who buys a copy of Put Domoi from him. I decide to stay out of his sight not to distract him. It soon gets busy and another young man smiles at Vitaly and buys a copy. I watch for a while as more people approach Vitaly, talk to him for some time and buy a street paper. When there seemed to be a slight break in the steady move of customers, I walked up to him and ask if my shooting pictures could interfere with his work. Shashlov grins at me and tells me his trade secret: "The more people there are around me, the higher the probability that other people come."

And indeed, people kept coming and going and buying his newspapers as I took pictures and chatted with Vitaly. Business is good, but Vitaly explains that it is not possible to stay at one station for a long time, because police officers are watching and often ask him to leave. He explains that was the reason why he had to leave the previous station in a rush.



Russian vendor of street paper Put Domoi Vitaly Petrovich Shashlov on the streets of St. Petersburg.

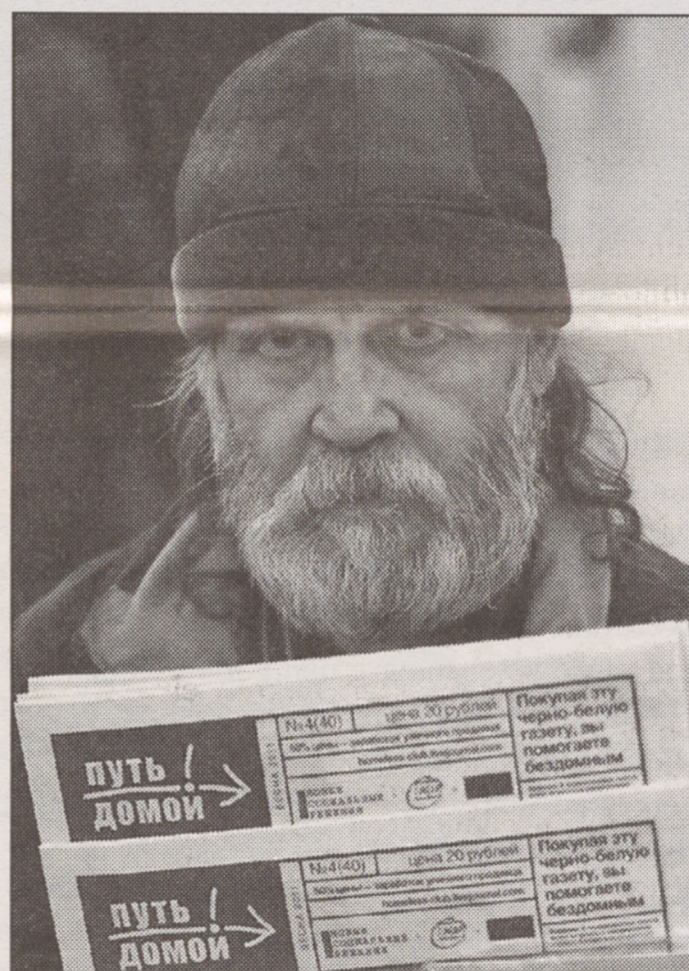
PHOTOS BY ALEKSEY TALIPOV

Then, something wonderful happens. A younger woman with grocery bags approaches Vitaly, pulls him aside by his sleeve and tells him something confidentially. Vitaly listens to her, almost looking like a father figure, nodding his head sympathetically. To a spectator, the two of them — Vitaly with his wild beard and the petite Russian woman — look like an Orthodox priest and a parishioner.

In the flow of people, Vitaly stands out, despite his short posture. Unlike other newspaper sellers, he does not shout out loud to advertise his product. Instead, he stands quietly, pressing the pack of papers against his chest, only moving his head, looking over his shoulder to make eye contact with a new stream of customers coming off a train or escalator. He moves his head slowly towards his shoulder from time to time but his body does not move. And still, there is something about him that makes you look twice. He mirrors wisdom and life experience.

Slowly moving toward me, he tells me we are boarding the next train and going to Primorskaya station. Once we are on the coach, he complains that he is not allowed to distribute the papers in a train, which seems unfair as a lot of illegal sellers get away with it. "They are putting up a show," he says, with irony in his voice.

At Primorskaya station I do not take any pictures, but just stand next to him and watch the business. Vitaly manages to sell almost all the papers. He has taken with him. He explains how difficult it is to predict each morning how much stock to buy, as you never know how many papers you might sell. A lot of young people approach Vitaly. When I notice that not many younger ladies seem to buy the paper from him, he smiles



as if he wants to say: "Just you watch." Within minutes after my comment the women start to approach us.

Vitaly explains that his readers are all very different. "I cannot describe one particular kind of buyer, it is all sorts of people," he says. His comment is illustrated by the many people that approach Vitaly in the short time we are at the station: from students to older women and young working professionals who according to Vitaly "like unusual things."

At the end of a long sales day, Vitaly seems satisfied with the turnover. I thank him and buy one of his last copies before we say goodbye.

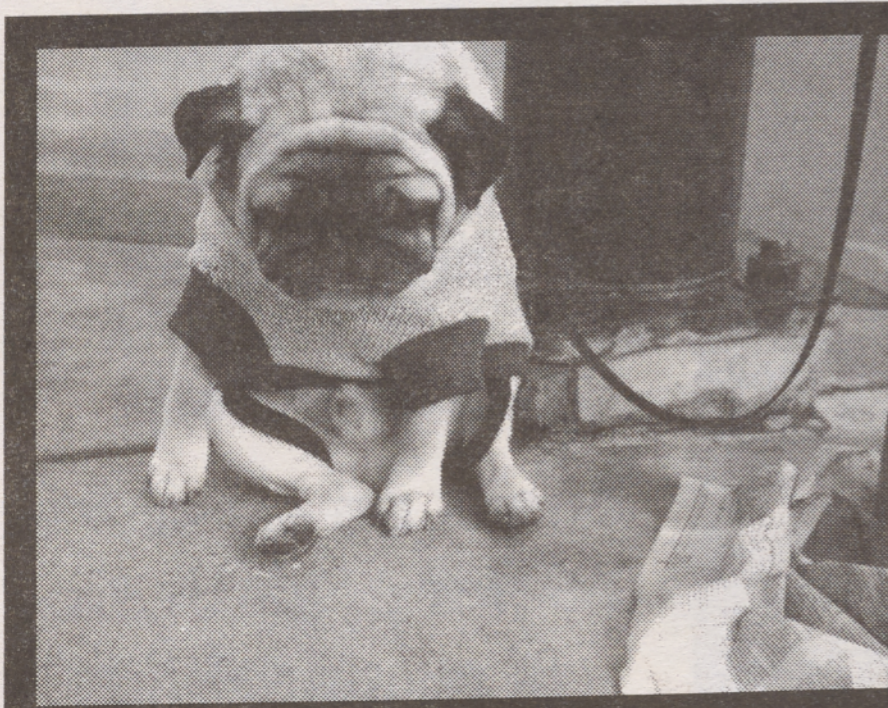
Translated from Russian into English by
Elena Volkova

Homelessness in Russia

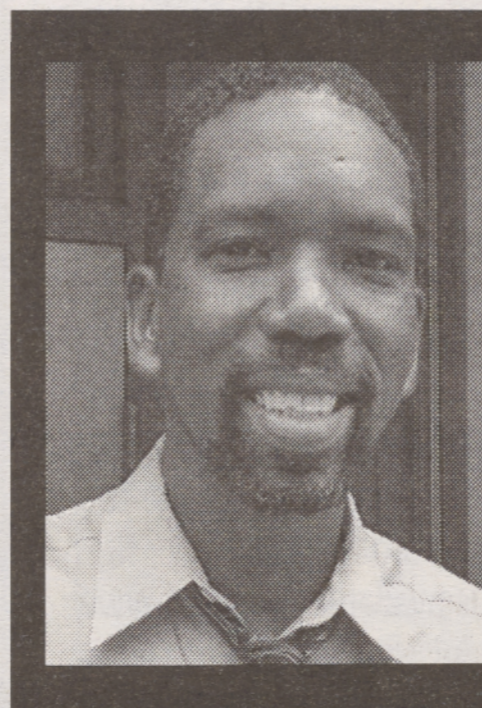
In Russia, a homeless person is not simply someone without a home. Access to virtually all state-funded social and medical services in Russia is dependent on a person's having a "propiska" — that is, registration at their place of residence. If, for whatever reason (family circumstances, a fraudulent property deal, inability to replace lost documents, etc.), a person cannot show that they have this registration, they are effectively excluded from society: they will not be able to obtain a legitimate job, access free healthcare, take recourse to law, have their marriage registered, or obtain education for their children, among other complications.

There are currently about four million people living in Russia without registration. Many of these people have nowhere to stay, face hunger, cold, poverty and loneliness, and are treated with suspicion by those around them. In most cases, they receive no help in solving their problems or surviving the dangers of life on the streets. St. Petersburg-based street paper Put Domoi, a sister paper to Street Roots, is one of the few organizations in Russia that provides a financial lifeline directly to the homeless.

Street Roots, Put Domoi, and 115 other papers are members of the International Network of Street Papers around the world. Combined, the street paper movement provide an income for about 1 million vendors globally.



Don't let an old paper get you down! Vendors are out selling new issues of Street Roots every two weeks!



The more a person loves themselves and takes themselves seriously, chances are the people you come across will do the same as well.

— Marlon Crump
Street Roots Vendor