

‘Best of Russia’: A Country Caught on Camera

As Vinzavod's exhibition shows, amateur photographers are upping their game in the annual photo contest

By [Ruth Moore](#)

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Vinzavod's 'Best of Russia' photo exhibition shows the country in an honest but human – and often surreal – light. **GRIGORY SYSOYEV**

An Arctic village buried under snow as the northern lights dance in the sky overhead; an elderly man sitting on a public swing in central Moscow; mailboxes stuffed with pamphlets for conservative politician Vitaly Milonov ahead of election day — these are just some of the images on show at “Best of Russia,” an encyclopedic photography exhibition at the Vinzavod Center for Contemporary Art.

Russia seems to offer no shortage of inspiration for the snapshot-happy.

“There are contrasts everywhere — in people, architecture, urban design. The country

provides endless opportunities for visual stories,” Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber, one of the photographers featured in the exhibition, told *The Moscow Times*.

To enter “Best of Russia” there is only one criterion: Your photo must have been taken in Russia at some point in the past year. It’s a successful formula that has made the project the most important photography competition in Russia over the past decade. It is also hugely popular with the general public.

This year, an expert jury whittled down 25,000 shots from both professional and amateur photographers to make their final selection. Now in its ninth year, the competition and corresponding exhibition are split into categories such as style, architecture and nature. “People. Events. Everyday Life” is by far the largest section, taking up the entire upper floor of the exhibition space.

Many of the images are potent reminders of the headline stories of 2016. Tetrault-Farber’s work is no exception. The AFP correspondent captured a crowd carrying the coffin of 19-year-old Vadim Kostenko, the first Russian serviceman to die in Syria.

Tetrault-Farber was there to document several hundred people as they walked down a muddy road from the Kostenko family’s home in Grechanaya Balka, which is about 100 kilometers from Krasnodar, to a local cemetery where he was buried.

It was a story that touched the hearts of many across Russia, and one surrounded by some controversy — members of Kostenko’s family do not believe the official line that the serviceman committed suicide.

“Best of Russia” doesn’t shy away from last year’s thornier subjects: activist Pyotr Pavlensky’s release from prison, the widespread demolition of kiosks around Moscow’s metro stations and the tragedy on Lake Syamozero in Karelia in which 14 children died when their canoes capsized in stormy weather.

“Some people don’t like the fact that there are difficult photos in the exhibition — both politically and socially,” says Lina Krasnyanskaya, the curator of the project. “But the main value of this exhibition is that it shows everything. The entrant picks their photo and we collate them to show the different colors of the country.”

Krasnyanskaya has seen the strength of competition entries improve every year, particularly from non-professional photographers. “There’s certainly a lot more finesse now compared to when we started in 2008,” she says.

One of these talented young photographers is 17-year-old Anna Sinyavskaya, who captured the view from her bedroom window. Covered in snow, the bright colors of slides and swings form dazzling geometric patterns.

“I looked outside and saw the way the sunlight was falling on the snow,” Sinyavskaya told *The Moscow Times*. “I believe one of the most important things in life is to see the beauty in ordinary things — finding harmony and appeal in playgrounds, lampposts and the windows of apartment buildings.”

James Hill, an award-winning photojournalist and jury member for the project, has

noticed an increase in shots such as Sinyavskaya's since he first appeared on the jury. "I often find more revealing aspects of the country from the amateur photographers," Hill says. "Not because the work is better, but because it is often less shaped by visual rigor and therefore more intimate as a result."

That's not to say that foreign professional photographers haven't managed to get under Russia's skin. For video and photojournalist Pascal Dumont, this is the third time he has been selected. This year's shot is from his "Obshchaga" ("Dormitory") series, and shows a student putting the finishing touches to his diploma artwork in the halls of his Moscow dormitory.

"I've been photographing him for three years," said Dumont. "I often go to the institute and never know what's going to happen, so I just walk around and see what catches my eye."

Dumont says he enjoys photographing in Russia because of the connections he builds with the people he meets: "As a photographer in Russia you might start off with a clichéd view of things, but then you understand more and are drawn in — that's what happened when I started working with students."

The popularity of photography in Russia is tangible at the exhibition, which sometimes sees 3,000 people visit in a day — a feat given the gallery's modest size. Many of them are inspired to pick up a camera and start capturing the world around them. Does Krasnyanskaya think new waves of amateurs snapping on the streets is a good thing?

"Absolutely. But I think pure art is not about the technical equipment you have or how you can filter an image on Instagram," she says. "It's about the thought and emotion that goes into taking that photo: the lighting that captures your eye, your timing, your choice of subject."

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