

07.07.2025

Marie Ivanova-Surae: “I Want To Present Women With Movies and Brand Name Cosmetics”

She is known in Russia and abroad primarily as a producer and director of more than 100 documentaries and feature films. However, in 2024 Marie Ivanova-Surae decided to change her activities and went into private business – production of cosmetics. Maria spoke to the BM.Moscow Foresight magazine of the reasons for this change and of many other things in the life of a businesswoman.

Cinema is my life and my destiny. This is why I have not left the movie industry completely. For example, now I am preparing to shoot a movie that is very important for me, it is about a mute girl named Taisia. It will involve a challenging task for actors, primarily in terms of psychology. This will be a parable, there will be lots of phantasies, even phantasmagoria… I will try to open up a complex inner self of my main character. The film will be shot jointly with Lebanon.

As for my sudden cosmetics passions, then these could likely be attributed to the “midlife crisis”. For women, if we believe psychologists, this crisis usually starts at 35, and for men it comes later. During this time people seek to change or add something to their lives. I have created three original cosmetics ranges, unlike anything else - Misomi Beauty, Misomi Patriki limited edition and Ylimuni.

Nevertheless, to manufacture cosmetic products one does not necessarily need to graduate first from the

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journalism department and then from the psychology department of the Moscow State University, and on top of that complete TV show making courses in London ...

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My way to the cosmetics business may seem winding and long, but as they say, there’s no escaping destiny! I have studied at the best university, worked at all major Russian TV channels, I have travelled across most of the world, co-produced films with Lebanon, Romania, Germany. My live-action short film – “The Last One” (Russia-Azerbaijan) – was selected for participation in the official competition of the Cannes Film Festival, other films won various awards and were featured in international movie screenings, were shown in theaters in Russia and all over the world.

Over the latest nine years I have been living and working between Beirut and Moscow. Lebanon appeared in my life in 2016 – I shot my “Fleeing the War” documentary about Syrian refugees. Then, in 2016 I managed the first Russian film festival in Lebanon, and from 2020 to 2022 I shot three more films – my director debut live-action movie “The Anger” (Russia, Lebanon, Germany) and two documentaries - "I'm not Lakit" (Russia, Lebanon, Romania) and “10 and Virginia” (Russia, Lebanon).

I approached creation of my brands - Misomi Beauty, Misomi Patriki limited edition and Ylimuni – with the very same creative potential I use for film production.

Generally speaking, all of my film production and journalism experience came in very handy. Searching for solutions in all situations, raising investment as a producer, networking for contacts and relations, my creative abilities, art and even scriptwriting skills have been very helpful.

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How did you start your cosmetics business?

Me and my team started out in May 2024. Prior to this I had decided to take a break from film production and invested all of my film revenues into establishing the Amma Group company to produce cosmetic products.

On my birthday, May 24, I invited my good friends – an operations director and a logistics manager (to be frank, I had lured them away to my company), and we started production of cosmetic products. First I hired a cosmetics business professional to coordinate things, she used to develop Faberlic cosmetics. This was a very proper move, because we had managed to avoid many mistakes. She helped us manufacture three brands from scratch.

Then I found a marketing specialist, who analyzed the audience, ran surveys, in parallel we prepared designs, images, shot videos, negotiated with marketplaces and online stores.

We are shooting mini-films and TV shows about our business moving forward, about Amma Group operations. For instance, just recently we have made a TV show about giant plumper Fedya and his challenging fate.

The cosmetics business is highly competitive. Gaining popularity and brand awareness is an arduous task for new brands. What made you so sure of success from the very beginning?

I constantly doubt myself. I have just recently changed the marketing team completely, because their methods and tricks would probably work for brands that are already famous, but not for us, newbies in the cosmetics business. Textbook marketing laws won’t work for no-name manufacturing companies – a hurricane of ideas, incredible creative insights and an unorthodox business approach are required.

But we do have notable success. Let’s look, for example, at the design of our cosmetics – this is a work of art! Everything is in harmony here - colors, patterns, original packaging.

Colorful and flashy packaging is important. But still, what’s in the product matters much more than all external signage. What are the advantages of your products versus others?

First, these are Russian-Lebanese cosmetic products, and the products under the Amma Group trademark have for the first time been launched on markets of many countries.

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It is very important to note, that our cosmetic brands are differentiated from others by our offer of a high-quality all-natural product at a fair price – no more than 1000. I have specifically developed this pricing policy, so our cosmetic products are affordable for many girls and women.

All our cosmetic products have skin care features, meaning you get “two-in-one”, beauty and health benefits. The primary age group ranges from 22 to 28 years. But our products are also bought by very young girls, their mothers and grandmothers. Men also buy our cosmetics as gifts.

Our headliners in the Misomi Beauty lineup are BB creme, lip plumper, eyebrow gel without white cast and unique liquid eyeshadow. These products are quickly sold out.

The Patriki line features a unique shiny primer which does not have to be removed before going to sleep, transparent lip-balm, tints in very beautiful colors and liquid eyeshadow of incredible hues.

The Ylimuni brand is a game-changer in skincare products. Together with Russian and Lebanese researchers we have developed a unique Muni complex, killing any unpleasant smells – from sweat to “old age odor”. All products are based on one-of-a-kind formulae.

For now, I cannot go into detail of these cosmetic products, but this is a truly unique product for the Russian and generally, for the global market. Specialists claim that nothing of a kind has ever been produced by anyone.

Our cosmetic products have been marketed in Russia and CIS countries since January 2025, and this summer we are going to the Lebanese market.

You are producing three cosmetics ranges at once, and these product lines feature many versatile products – from micellar water and cremes to tints, eyeshadow and deodorants. Is your “carpet bombing” strategy instead of a “sniper shot” paying off?

Essentially, we are still too young in comparison with other global brands. We wouldn’t count on high sales right now. We have entered the market three months ago and realized that we have to act outside the box to get through to customer hearts and minds … I don’t think we should pursue material goals, like making more money, but rather follow spiritual ones – which means giving women joy, health and care.

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My business partner is Lebanese. Recently we have taken part in the largest health and beauty exhibition in Beirut. Our main goal was to find a distributor, and we have found one.

We had the largest and most beautiful stand at the exhibition. We provided free make-up sessions right at the stand and it had become clear pretty fast, that Lebanese women are really excited about our cosmetics.

Alexander Rudakov, Russian Ambassador to Lebanon, also visited our stand and was rather pleased. We were the only brand from Russia to take part in the exhibition and the first brand to be sold in Lebanon. And it is widely known that Lebanon is the gateway to the Arab world.

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Why has Beirut become a second home to you, and what's the place of Moscow in your life now?

Indeed, I really call Lebanon my second motherland. Over nine years of working in the Middle East I realized that this country means a lot to me. And it all began with a very movie-like story …

I and my operator went to Syria to shoot the "Fleeing the War" documentary about Syrian refugees. But our flight to Damascus was canceled, it was during the war in Syria in late 2015. Then we decided to go to Beirut, and take a car from there to Damascus. But we had a surprise waiting for us there as well: the road to the Syrian capital was covered with snow, though it very rarely snows in Lebanon.

After five days of filming in Lebanon, I decided to find an opportunity to go back to Syria …And I found the only scheduled Beirut-Damascus flight.

In Syria we got cheated by swindlers, who did not take us to the hotel that we had booked, but drove us to an apartment with no water, power and heating. On top of this, early in the morning we heard bomb explosions, and this was when I realized that the risks of our trip were too great – it was deadly dangerous around us! But still, I decided to complete the film.

The next day we got back to Beirut and went to the Russian embassy, seeking help to finish the film. I must say that our diplomats and cultural center staff really helped us out then. I completed shooting the Syrian refugee film in Beirut and made many new friends.

In 2016, with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, the Ministry of Culture of Lebanon and many other organizations and institutions, I held the first Russian cinema festival in Lebanon. And in 2020 I shot the first Russian-Lebanese feature film "The Anger". Then I shot two more documentaries and now I am preparing my next feature film "Take My Sun With You".

Moscow will always remain the main city of my life. I was born here, my family and friends, my film crew live here. I adore Moscow and love watching the city, changing fast right in front of me.

I like it that there are still lots of foreign tourists in central Moscow, including tourists from Arab countries.

Is it true that you have a close relative, who is an Honored Artist of Russia?

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This is my grandfather. He is famous not only for creating many Soviet posters, but also for his version of the new coat of arms of the capital city, which was approved in 1993 by the Government of Moscow.

The image is inspired by the plot of “The Miracle of George and the Dragon”, which was often used in Ancient Rus on seals, coins, in prince and czar symbols. I am really proud of my grandfather!

Marie, they call you an ambassador of Russian-Lebanese friendship. Please tell us about the attitudes of ordinary Lebanese people to our country, to Moscow

The reason for this might be the fact of preparing the first ever meeting of the Mayors for Moscow and Beirut several years ago together with the Lebanon Embassy in Russia.

Our nations have many similar features – never giving up under hardships, helping each other out, rejoicing successes of your compatriots.

I have witnessed bravery of the Lebanese people multiple times. I recall, when in 2020 we were shooting “The Anger” movie, an explosion rocked the port of Beirut – hundreds of people died, thousands lost their homes, several city neighborhoods were completely destroyed. At the time an Emercom airplane from Russia flew in to help the Lebanese. It was a relief that no relatives or friends of the film crew had been hurt, but I gave them all a day off and went to shoot a documentary on the aftermath of the explosion by myself. I saw hundreds of Lebanese taking to the streets with tools and appliances to restore their city. They immediately started a relief fund and over two years most of the buildings in Beirut have risen up from the ruins.

The Lebanese never forget those who had helped them during hard times, those who stood next to them in times of trouble.

A lot of Lebanese people are grateful to Russia for providing quotas for students to learn in the best universities of our country. When I was raising funds for the first Russian film festival in Lebanon, one of my sponsors was a local graduate from one of Moscow universities. He explained his generous donation: “Some time ago Russia gave me an opportunity to study, and I have become a successful businessman, now it is my turn to repay this debt”.

Many Lebanese people are connected to Moscow by family ties, their Russian wives. That’s why Moscow has a quite large Lebanese diaspora. And children in such international languages always know the Russian language.

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Of course, I would primarily develop cultural cooperation of our countries, because it is culture that fosters understanding and trust. Art brings new ties and relations to life.

There are many talented Lebanese people– artists, writers, musicians. This is a very versatile nation. But they are eager to build cultural ties with Moscow. My friend, the Lebanon Conservatory director, has invited Russian musicians to perform in her orchestra. And I thought it would be great to invite a Lebanese orchestra to give concerts in Moscow.

I think the Lebanese market is a promising one – the Lebanese like buying and selling things. This has been in their blood since the times of Ancient Phoenicia.

As I see it, it would be great to support the Lebanese people in construction or rebuilding of the country's infrastructure. Many facilities have been destroyed in many wars – power stations, railways and roads, residential housing.

Lebanese people visit Moscow very often and they are amazed by how much the city has changed. They are saying with envious admiration: "We wish we had such proactive leaders as you have in Moscow".

Yelena Yakovleva.

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