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Silhouettes of Everyday Life Reflected in Footwear

Fashion changes every six months, but good footwear stays with us for years—providing comfort and the freedom of self-expression. However, creating a pair that can withstand the frantic pace of the city and won't go out of style in a single season is a task that requires true craftsmanship. Moreover, in turbulent Russian market conditions, the survival of footwear factories demands pinpoint accuracy in strategy as well. We spoke with Yulia Menyasheva, co-founder of the MOF-BERG brand, about balancing aesthetics, quality, and the harsh laws of the market.

Footwear fashion evolves alongside human progress. We have come a long way from bast shoes and boots that could be worn on either foot—left or right (no difference)—and equally universal felt boots (valenki), to sneakers made with high-tech materials and specialized footwear for various activities. How do you see the future direction of footwear fashion, and what can you offer from your end?

- Fashion is a mirror of humanity. It reflects social, economic, and cultural shifts, technological progress, and the emergence of new professions and hobbies. At the same time, footwear, much like clothing, operates on cyclical mechanisms: chunky shapes give way to sleek silhouettes, and pointed toes are replaced by round or square ones. Yet, there are timeless values: relevance, reliability, comfort, aesthetics, and balance. Health and high quality are always in fashion.

Today, conscious consumption is coming to the forefront. We are moving away from fast fashion and an overabundance of low-

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quality items toward making smart choices. High-quality footwear lasts longer, doesn't harm your health, and makes you feel confident.

Interestingly, the cyclical nature of fashion is becoming less rigid. While people used to transition en masse from pointed toes to square ones, today practically any option is relevant: heels, sneakers, or shoes with round or square toes. You can find anything in stores that allows for freedom of self-expression. This is also a step toward mindfulness: you buy a pair that will remain relevant for several seasons.

We produce urban women's footwear. It must strike a balance between aesthetics, style, comfort, functionality, and technology. The city sets a fast pace: you need to get a lot done and walk a lot during the day, and your shoes must be comfortable in any scenario. At the same time, they need to complement various outfits—from business attire to evening wear. These are exactly the challenges our company solves. We do not chase fleeting trends; instead, we create high-quality wardrobe essentials: loafers, pumps, flats, boots, sandals, ankle boots, brogues, and sneakers. Every single model is meticulously crafted: we refine the shoe last for a perfect fit and select materials considering the minor details that impact comfort. Even a leather lining can feel completely different in the heat versus the cold—and we have extensive experience in this. We factor in the weight of the footwear, the durability of the materials, and the overall construction. Our color palette features universal, basic shades that remain relevant for more than one season, complemented by limited-edition runs of trending colors. The foundation of our collection consists of calm tones, clean lines, and silhouettes tailored for everyday life.

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Very little is known to the general public about the history of your company. How was the company founded, and what were its key milestones?

- In 2013, entrepreneurs Ali Menyashev and Islam Aliev joined forces to open a factory. The budget was modest, and the equipment had to be sourced from all across Russia. Islam Aliev comes from Dagestan, our southern republic, and has been familiar with the shoemaking trade since childhood, as his father owned a footwear production business. Later on, he collaborated with global brands and exchanged expertise with major foreign factories. Ali Menyashev graduated from the Moscow Institute of the Leather Industry; although he lacked practical experience in shoemaking at the start, he had a specialized education, management experience, and—as a father of three daughters—a great understanding of women's fashion and needs.

Initially, the factory operated as a contract manufacturer for other brands. Over time, we realized it was time to create our own brand: we didn’t want to compromise on quality, and we knew we could make a high-quality product at an affordable price. That is how one of the brand's core missions was born—delivering the optimal price-to-quality ratio and making premium footwear as accessible as possible. In 2015, we registered the "Moscow Footwear Factory" corporate entity, launched production under our own label, and entered a major marketplace under the BERG brand, which enjoyed a highly successful sales launch. In 2017, we officially registered the MOF-BERG trademark.

How do you manage to compete with foreign brands, and are there serious rivals among Russian companies?

- We don’t experience fierce competition within our specific segment. There is the low-end segment, where competition with China is high, and there is the luxury segment, but the mid-market price tier features relatively few brands. If anything, we see a shortage of good footwear at a reasonable price. At the same time, every brand has its own vibe, signature style, color palette, and silhouettes, so customers simply choose what resonates with them most. For us, it would actually be a plus if more manufacturing facilities emerged in Russia, as this would expand the local components and materials market.

Granted, within online marketplaces, we do compete with cheap Chinese footwear, which sees high demand. This is tied to consumer purchasing power, something we cannot control. Because of this, we are gradually shifting toward our own direct sales channels. Our core audience will stay with us because the demand for high-quality, durable footwear remains steady.

You are heavily focused on marketplace sales. Do you see the development of your own retail network in your future?

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- Historically, we started specifically on online marketplaces, which provided a great launchpad and allowed us to build a large audience. Our sales grew actively, and we simultaneously developed our brick-and-mortar retail: we opened a factory outlet, then another location, and actively managed our social media. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online sales skyrocketed, leading us to focus entirely on e-commerce and temporarily close our physical stores.

Today, the situation is complex: consumer demand is shifting, and marketplace rules are changing. We are restructuring once again. We are optimizing our processes and have launched our own sole production. Now, we are pivoting toward growth through our own channels: we are launching a website and returning to retail in the near future by opening our own store.

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How do customers find out about you?

- Over our years of operating on marketplaces, we have accumulated a vast customer database and built a large social media following. Back when our retail store was open, we connected with customers directly, and to this day, we still see warm mentions of it in our reviews. Word-of-mouth marketing is highly active for us—in fact, it is one of our primary channels today, as attracting an audience on social media is becoming increasingly difficult. Opening our new retail store will serve as another key avenue for expanding our audience.

You work with natural materials. Where do you source your raw materials (leather, hardware)?

We source some of our upper materials—leather and suede—in Russia. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to chemical and raw material challenges faced by local suppliers. We source another portion of our materials from Italy: they offer excellent quality, beautiful colors, and consistent batches with matching shades and thicknesses. That said, due to sanctions, purchasing from Europe has grown more complicated, creating payment and delivery hurdles.

We get our soles from Russia, Italy, and a small portion from Turkey and China. To reduce our reliance on imports, we launched our own sole production line. It partially covers our needs, and we even sell soles to other footwear factories.

Today, we are also establishing leather supplies from China: they do offer high-quality materials with a wide selection of colors and thicknesses. Working with China used to be more expensive and time-consuming than with Italy, but now the prices and lead times are nearly identical, and sometimes China even turns out to be more cost-effective.

Hardware is trickier: it doesn't always meet our strict requirements, so we are actively developing the Chinese route here as well—again, due to their vast selection and fast delivery. We are absolutely in favor of Russia developing its own domestic market for materials and hardware, but for now, we have to look for alternatives.

However, shoemaking is not limited to just leather and soles. Throughout the production process, we use other materials that make up the "inside filling": leatherboard, toe boxes, heel counters, insoles, interlinings, elastics, tapes, adhesives, and threads. Most of these are imported from Europe; we do not cut corners, even on these elements that are completely invisible to the eye.

What equipment do you use, and how are maintenance and spare parts handled nowadays?

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- Unfortunately, there is no domestic footwear manufacturing equipment. Our machinery—cutting systems, presses, and sewing machines—is mostly Italian, with some Chinese and German equipment, all of high quality. Russian companies handle the supply and maintenance. When it comes to repairs, we rely on mechanics who specialize in shoe production machinery—there are extremely few such specialists left in the country, and they are worth their weight in gold.

The talent shortage is a widespread issue right now. How do you handle recruiting and retaining production staff? Do you provide internal training?

- We have built a team of professionals who have been with us for a long time, so our staff turnover is low.

A footwear factory involves many complex operations that require surgical precision, and we hire experienced people for those positions. However, there are also tasks that do not require specialized training—we can take on newcomers for those roles and train them on-site. The challenge is that not many people want to work in manufacturing nowadays; you need to be predisposed to it and have certain character traits. If a person is interested and shows potential, we involve them in various processes and train them in related operations.

What are your plans for business expansion?

- The footwear industry is currently in crisis: some manufacturing facilities are shutting down, while others continue to operate but are forced to scale back production. Right now, it is more a matter of survival. However, we are not losing heart; on the contrary, we look to the future and make plans. We see our potential and are confident that we will prevail.

Today, the company is focused on restructuring internal processes: we are searching for new material procurement channels, changing our approaches to sales and marketing, and returning to direct contact with the consumer. In fact, we are building many of our processes from scratch.

Our plans are ambitious: we want to expand, launch production lines for men's and children's footwear, and eventually introduce outerwear and wardrobe essentials. But that is for the future. In the short term, our priorities are opening a retail network, streamlining production after our relocation, and returning to our previous volumes. We have plenty of plans, and we believe everything will work out.

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