

Interview with Valentin Ivanovich Volodko, President of Volmax:



Valentin Volodko

Andrei: The First Moscow Watch Factory (FMWF) and Poljot are well-known in the West. Is it true that Volmax was created by the best employees of FMWF and that current Volmax watches are still equipped with Poljot movements? Could you please recount for us why and how you took the decision to create Volmax? How similar/different is today's Volmax from the FMWF?

Valentin Volodko: We started as distributors of Russian watches in general, with Poljot as our main product. When the Soviet Union crushed down, as you well know, many big enterprises could barely survive and many eventually collapsed. Poljot tried to live, but under conditions of wild Russian market this was really hard. Small companies were much more flexible in management. Besides, new economic background with new economic conditions provided better opportunities for private companies. Thus we invited technical specialist from the dying FMWF and established our own company named Volmax. Of course, Poljot factory itself has gained lots of assets and production facilities for his 75-year history. It was capable of producing a watch from a piece of steel. That is something Volmax can't do it. But thanks to the fact that we have our assembling shop with highly-skilled watch-makers we are able to assemble watches with quality check control as per Soviet Poljot's standards which were really very strict.

Andrei: Volmax has moved the Buran line to Switzerland. An article in Wikipedia also reports that in 2005 Volmax created a new brand called the Russian Watch Factory (RWF) whose first model was the "Patriot" watch. What were the reasons behind these changes and how do you envision the future of the Aviator, Sturmanskie, Buran and RWF brands? Towards which market segments will each brand be targeted and what kind of customers will you seek to interest in them?

Valentin Volodko: We moved Buran to Switzerland because we think that we are skilled enough to compete with Swiss watch-makers. We think we have something unique in our designs and we are not ashamed to show it. Besides, it's a good opportunity to get real experience from Swiss watch-makers and not just from refined fairs like Baselworld but from behind, from real life. We see the Aviator and

Sturmanskie brands as military and sport lines, whereas Buran is a “classic line”, a more formal “dress-watch” if you want. As for the RWF brand, will plan to discontinue it.

Andrei: Volmax 24 hour watches are possibly the best 24 hour watches currently made in Russia. When and why did Volmax begin making 24 hour watches? Was that something which the FMWF had already done or was that something new for Volmax? What is the importance of 24 hour watches for the Volmax today? In the West 24 hour Aviators and Sturmanskie are gradually seen as a very real competitors to the very expensive Swiss 24 hour watches. Do 24 hour watches represent a key product for Volmax or do they represent only a rather narrow “side-product” to the rest of the watches made by Volmax? How do you assess the future of mechanical 24 hour watches in general?

Valentin Volodko: The FMWF had produced 24-hour watches and we therefore could include 24-hour watches in our product range from the very beginning. Still, this type of watch is rather unique and special and many people have a hard time reading the 24-hour dials. For this reason, they are not mainstream watches. This being said, there is always a regular demand for such watches. The share of 24-hour watches in our sales is currently around 4-6% and we think it will not change greatly in the future.

Andrei: The other company in Russia which is famous for producing 24 hour watches is Raketa (Vostok also produced several 24 hour watches but has now discontinued this line). How different or how similar are the Raketa 24 hour mechanisms (such as their famous 2609NA) and the mechanisms used in current Volmax brand watches? Do they have a common “ancestry”? Have these 24 hour mechanisms evolved over time and, if yes, how so?

Valentin Volodko: 24-hours are not really popular on Russian market - as I already said. Vostok and Raketa have 24mm caliber mechanisms. During Soviet time they co-operated together, so their movements might have similar construction. The Poljot 24-hour movement has a 26mm caliber, so its construction is certainly different. Nonetheless, their main features are quite similar. Soviet engineers always kept working on improving these movements, but this work stopped after the collapse of the USSR.

Andrei: One of the most beautiful 24 hour watches ever made in Russia arguably is the Buran Chronograph 31681/7248740 whose 31681 mechanism is reportedly a complication of the famous Poljot 3133. Are most 24 hour watches based on a regular 12 hour mechanism? How different are the typical mechanisms of a 12 and 24 hour watch? What changes were made to the Poljot 3133 to transform it into the 31681 with a 24 hour subdial?

Valentin Volodko: You know that any watch movement is a complicated system of gears. So, each gear is calculated and designed to turn with proper frequency. So, 2623 movement (24-hour) is a slight modification of 2614 movement (regular 12-hour movement). The differences are in so-called “hour wheel” and “day wheel” which rotates twice slower due to special gear design. Almost the same for 31681: there are couple of extra gears/wheels which are set-up on a bridge and together provide 24-hour indication.

Andrei: The Buran Chronograph 31681/7248740 (I am referring here to the model with a 24 hour subdial and not to the very similar one with a 12 hour subdial) is no longer in production and Buran has moved to Switzerland. Is there any hope that in the not too distant future the Sturmanskie series could produce another high-end chronograph similar to the Buran Chronograph 31681/7248740, maybe with a slightly larger (45mm?) case? What are your plans for future Aviator or Sturmanskie chronographs with 24 hour (sub-)dials?

Valentin Volodko: That all depends on the demand: if the market asks - we'll produce! If there are only few collectors who would really be interested in such a watch this is not a sufficient reason to

produce 200 pieces (which is the minimum quantity that we have to order with our case suppliers). Also, we have to keep in mind that in the current economic climate the price of such a watch might be quite high.

Andrei: Most current Volmax 24 hour watches do not feature an “exhibition back” case. Do you have any plans to release more 24 hour watches with an exhibition back in the future?

Valentin Volodko: This is not a problem at all! Watches with an exhibition back require additional treatment of bridges (so-called “Geneva stripe”) and that increases the price. In case of more expensive chronographs such as the 3133 this would not be a problem, but for the cheaper 2623 movements this might be too much.

Andrei: The Aviator brand is famous for making elegant yet sportive watches, not only for pilots but also for other “active-lifestyle” consumers. Yet, Aviator watches are typically rated at only 3 or 5 ATM of water resistance. Do you have any plans to release watches with 10-20 ATM water resistance which could be worn by Aviator fans while swimming, rafting or sailing?

Valentin Volodko: We have water-proof line called “Propeller” 2824/2915489. It is, however, very difficult and sometimes even impossible to provide water-proof for chronographs: they leak at the chrono pushers. This is why you can hardly find mechanical water-proof chronograph on the market.

Andrei: It seems to me that an ideal Russian 24 hour watch should be a chronograph, with luminous hour and minute hand and dial, with a water resistance of at least 10ATM and an “exhibition” back case which would display the mechanism inside the watch. Is there any possibility that Volmax would make such a watch in the future?

Valentin Volodko: Unfortunately, we do not produce 10ATM 24-hour watches. Still, 10ATM would be a good competitive advantage for any type of watch (not only for 24-hours). Undoubtedly, there will be a demand for this type of watches, but we believe that this extra 10ATM feature will not dramatically affect the demand for our watches.

Andrei: Thank you very much for your time and answers.