

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST CONNECTS PEOPLE AND GOVERNMENT

Text and photo: Sari Pöyhönen

Stepa Mitaki is a 26-year old community activist from Murmansk, Russia. He believes in electronic democracy and wants to improve everyday life in cities.

“COMMUNITY ACTIVISM is a huge movement in Russia nowadays. We activists are people who want to improve communities. We work for people's voices to be heard”, Mitaki explains.

Community activism started to rise in Russia in 2012 after the large demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg. People were protesting against what they considered unfair elections. Community activism reaches out to touch those who don't want to vote with their feet and don't want to migrate from Russia, but who want to make a difference.

“You can't change the world if you can't change yourself. It sounds like a cliché. But I have to serve as an example. Something forces me to work.”

Migrating is a dream and a problem

When Stepa Mitaki was young, he planned to migrate from his hometown, like many youngsters do in the North. This movement reduces the population of Murmansk and the North every year. According to the latest statistics, Murmansk has slightly over 299 000 inhabitants. In 2010, the number was about 310 000.

“I wanted to move to Moscow or abroad. And I did. I lived in Moscow for two years after my graduation. I worked for an advertising agency. After a while I stopped liking my work. It was just trying to convince people to buy things that they don't need.”

Mitaki says that he is actually not against people moving away from their hometown.

“It makes you look at the world in wider perspective. I still want to move abroad - for a while.”

Back to murmansk to do electronic democracy

Stepa Mitaki moved back to Murmansk in 2012 and started projects with his friends. They established a company called My City, which nowadays has four people working in it.

“I'm good when it comes to technologies and I want to improve life in the city. I call it electronic democracy. We made an application for smartphones called Trolley Hunt. We launched it first in Murmansk, but it is now used globally in many cities.”

With the app you can check on your smartphone to see when the trolleybuses are coming and going. But it has problems.

“We suffer from a lack of information from the trolleybus company. Now they have electronic information screens providing the timetables at many bus stops in Murmansk.

So maybe our app is not needed so much anymore...?"

According to Mitaki, a better project is their MyMurmansk service. It is an online connection between people and government. On the website people can specify a location in Murmansk and submit ideas on how to improve the area. For example, if you see a good place for a children's playground, or a need for new benches or a new bus stop at a certain crossroads, you can send your idea to the website. Mitaki checks the ideas and publishes them online. He also lets the municipal government know about them.

Does the municipality government listen?

"I haven't seen much in the way of results, but these are long-term projects. One result we do have though. In summer 2013 they built a safer place to walk in front of one food store. It was an idea from our project."

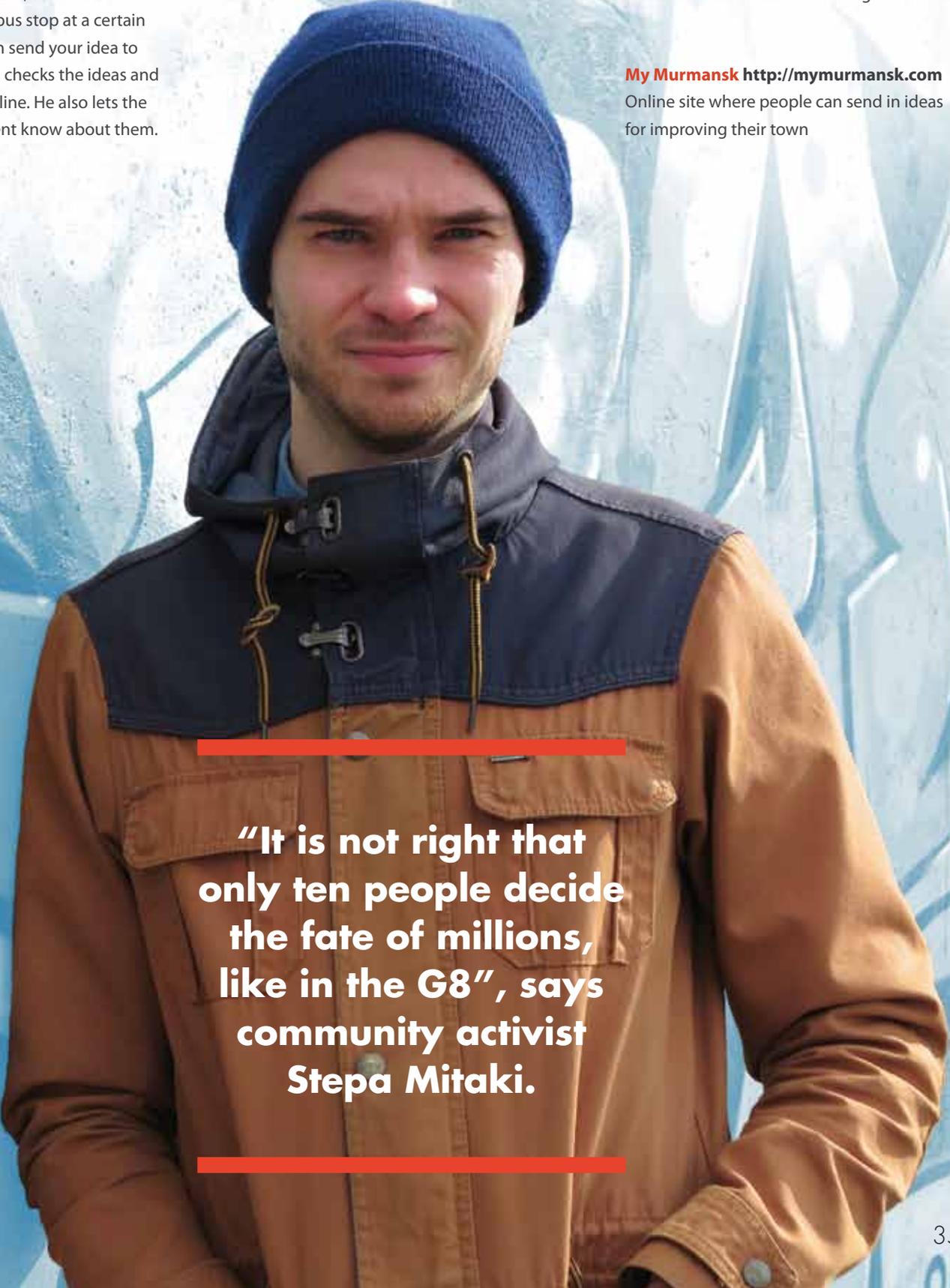
It sounds like he might be tempted to

participate in politics: he is active, talented and wants to improve the community. Political parties might love that kind of candidate.

"At least for now, I don't want to get into politics. But I would like to see more young talented people as politicians. That could give a lot to society. Community activism takes plenty of my time, but I want to inspire others and do at least something." ●

My Murmansk <http://mymurmansk.com>

Online site where people can send in ideas for improving their town



"It is not right that only ten people decide the fate of millions, like in the G8", says community activist Stepa Mitaki.