

# TSARINA Baturina

Russia's richest woman  
on supporting the youth of Europe

WORDS: JOSH SIMS

**E**lena Baturina simultaneously rolls her eyes and wrinkles her nose at the question. Just what does she make of the title ascribed to her by the media: 'Russia's Richest Woman'? 'I don't suppose that I am, probably – I'm just the only one to declare my wealth,' she laughs. 'It's just not something I think about. It's not like I need another dress. The biggest privilege of the position is that I get to meet really astonishing people, and not just established figures but young people with incredible ideas.'

Baturina – London-based and, to get the vulgarities out of the way, having been worth at different times over the last decade anywhere between \$1bn and \$4bn – is big on young people. Her think-tank-cum-foundation, Be Open, may have been established with the rather vague if noble intention of fostering creativity of all kinds – since 2012 it's sponsored design events, led workshops, run conferences and launched art prizes, among other activities – but here she is at City Hall with the Mayor's Fund for London's *Dragon's Den*-style City Pitch programme, handing out her large cheques to a bunch of junior schools who have had to work up all sorts of entrepreneurial plans.

'It's amazing how you get these very small kids trying to tackle these enormous issues – how to help the homeless through winter, how to make sick children in hospital deal with loneliness

– and with actual, practical results too,' says Baturina, who, while typically poker-faced, seems genuinely touched by this. 'And the younger the child, the easier it is to get their ideas. They're not spoiled yet. They're not selfish yet. And it's down to us if they become that way.'

Perhaps this is why she's glad that, more by luck than judgement, her two daughters have been educated in the West. Here, they can own their successes; back home, Baturina says, they would have been locked into a system of the wealthy and well-connected that would all but have guaranteed that success regardless of their efforts. Perhaps this is why she's told them that she will invest in their education but, after that, 'they'll have to make their own way – because it's their life and they should be responsible for it'.

Baturina, 55, may have put school well behind her by the time she turned entrepreneurial, but she had her own ideas too. Starting out alongside her parents on the factory floor of an industrial tool-makers, and studying in the evenings, she moved up to work as a research assistant but found that ideas generated by her generation were typically rebuffed by the staid oldies – 'as young people in Russia we had a different outlook to the leaders,' she recalls. In time, she would get into computer hardware, earning enough to shift into recycling plastics. Her company, Inteco, became a maker of plastic homewares – winning by making it. ☺

