

CONTEXT

The Moscow Times
ARTS & IDEAS

Spreading the Word

A new glossy magazine about Russia appears in North American bookstores.

By Masha Rumer

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Do Russian women shave their legs? What's the deal with homosexuality in Russia? These are among the questions tackled in a new glossy magazine whose debut issue appeared last month in U.S., Canadian and British bookstores.

Russia!, an English-language quarterly with an initial print run of 20,000, aims to serve as a reality check to Western conceptions of Russia as a place populated with spies, vodka-guzzling chess players and mail-order brides. Its target reader is the Westerner who may not know much about the country but is interested in it, said Michael Idov, main editor of the next issue.

Idov, together with the magazine's publisher, Ilya Merenzon, met with a reporter near Union Square in New York, where Russia! has its editorial offices. Both Idov and Merenzon stressed that the magazine is largely apolitical and has no Kremlin ties -- something they are often asked.

"It's so unaffiliated with the Kremlin, in fact, in the second issue there's going to be some anti-Putin material, if I have anything to do with it," said Idov, who was born in Riga and also works for New York Magazine as a contributing editor.

Russia! is co-owned by Press Release Group, a New York-based company headed by Merenzon, and New Century Bold, a company registered in the British Virgin Islands and headed by Andrew Paulson, the U.S. expatriate businessman best known for founding the Afisha publishing house in Moscow.

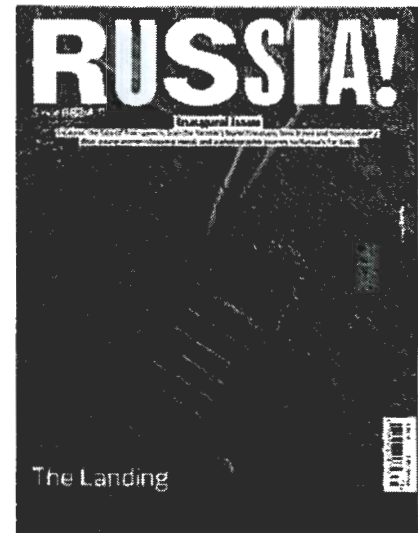
In its first issue, the 132-page glossy serves up the edgy sensibility of a Lonely Planet travel guide with a sampling of modern culture, as well as a healthy dose of humor. Heavy on design, it includes a number of photo spreads that illuminate various aspects of day-to-day Russian life, from kitschy Soviet hiking gear to the crammed interior of a Moscow apartment. In "Dacha," a tongue-in-cheek fashion spread, overdressed Russian girls in gaudy makeup chop wood or languish against a rustic backdrop. (Their wardrobe was all made by Russian designers.)

The magazine boasts Artemy Lebedev -- perhaps Russia's best-known designer -- as its art director. Other contributors include Moscow gallery guru Marat Gelman, credited as the arts editor; author Boris Akunin, with an excerpt from his novel "The Winter Queen"; and Olga Sergiyenko, a former sex columnist for Bolshoi Gorod who is touted as Russia's answer to Candace Bushnell.

The editorial team chose content for the first issue by asking students at Western universities what they wanted to know about Russia. The magazine has also used creative marketing: Its first 100 subscribers got canned air from St. Petersburg and chocolates as freebies, Merenzon said.

Born in Chelyabinsk, Merenzon holds an MBA from New York's Pace University and is the founder and CEO of Press Release Group, a market research and public relations firm specializing in the Russian-American market. Its projects include RUXX, an index that tracks the performance of Russian stocks on foreign markets, which the company maintains with RIA-Novosti, the Russian state news agency. Merenzon has also edited Metro, a Russian-language entertainment magazine in New York.

Merenzon's latest venture into publishing follows the launch of several other English-language media outlets designed to inform Westerners about Russia. In 2005, RIA-Novosti created Russia Today, a satellite television channel, and began publishing Russia Profile, a monthly magazine. The latter is published in conjunction with Independent Media Sanoma Magazines, the parent company of The Moscow Times.



Press Release Group

The cover of Russia! features a logotype designed by Moscow's Art Lebedev Studio.

Most recently, RIA-Novosti announced in February that it would target the expat market by financing a major remake of the Moscow News, the sister newspaper of the Russian weekly Moskovskiy Novosti. RIA-Novosti plans to double the newspaper's size from 16 pages to 32 and to increase its print run.

But unlike those publications, Russia! generally steers clear of politics. The most political article in the first issue is an interview with Nina Khrushcheva, the granddaughter of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, in which she discusses freedom of speech in Russia.

Merenzon denied that Russia! has propagandistic goals, saying that it may eventually run stories about military conscription -- "what happens to people in the army and how shitty their life is" -- as well as tales of doing business in Russia.

"We're not going to edit it for political reasons," Merenzon said. "Relationship with advertisers is important, but we're a business venture."

Many of the ads in the first issue of Russia! are from high-profile Russian brands such as Aeroflot, Baltika beer and Rambler.ru. Most of those advertisers are clients of Press Release Group, Merenzon said.

Merenzon also said that despite their identical names, the magazine has nothing to do with "Russia!", the mammoth exhibition of Russian art at New York's Guggenheim Museum whose 2005 opening was attended by President Vladimir Putin.

So far, Russia! can only be bought in small independent bookstores. One of them is St. Mark's Bookshop in New York, which has been selling just over a dozen issues per week since mid-February. Margarita Shalina, a bookstore employee who is of Russian origin herself, said most of the buyers were trendy professionals in their 20s and 30s. She called the magazine "cool" and "clever."

Eventually, Russia! will hit the shelves of giants like Barnes & Noble and Borders, Merenzon promised. "We feel we are on the right track," he said. "We now have to fine-tune our project."

Alexander Osipovich contributed to this report.

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