The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In the Spotlight: Orthodox Dress Codes

By Anna Malpas

January 20, 2011



This week, Vsevolod Chaplin, a top Orthodox Church spokesman, had a go at Russian women for "mistaking the street for a striptease," saying that women who wore too few clothes and too much makeup would never find Mr. Right.

Chaplin, who unfortunately is far more talkative than his famous namesake, has already given his august opinion that women who wear miniskirts and get drunk are to blame if they get raped.

His latest statement got a bit of sneaking sympathy from artsy blogger types who would not be seen dead in leopard print, while rights activists such as Lyudmila Alexeyeva became unlikely defenders of lipstick.

Chaplin was backed by Muslim clergy, including Mukhammedgali Khuzin of Perm, who told Interfax, "It's very difficult for me to imagine Mrs. Alexeyeva wearing a miniskirt."

Without getting into a theological debate, I couldn't help noticing that he made the comments on the same day as the Russian Orthodox Church actively encouraged people to strip down to

bikinis and jump into holes in the ice in front of priests.

Tabloid photographers at least tend to have unholy thoughts about this and concentrate on the younger, more nubile contingent.

As for the church's views on women's clothing, it's fair to say that I would have gone into a lot more beautiful churches if I hadn't feared an elderly woman shouting at me for wearing trousers as if it were still the 1950s.

Chaplin's wisecracks were also badly timed, since it's hard to imagine anything less like a stripper than the bundles of fur coats, jumpers, thermals and woolly tights walking down the streets at the moment — unless he was referring to the hasty removal of such layers when entering another superheated office.

Personally, I admire Russian women for trying to dress sexily in difficult circumstances.

Chaplin should appreciate what an art it is to dress nicely when you can't wear white or anything that trails in slush, mud and dust, and your footwear needs to be able to maneuver on polished ice and wade through giant puddles.

And surely most men agree.

One expat journalist told me recently that "Russian women wear tight jeans and high heels, and British women wear baggy jeans and trainers. I know which is sexier," as I guiltily hid my baggy jeans and clumpy boots under the table.

I'd say Chaplin was years out of date, anyway.

It may have been a fashion free-for-all in the 1990s when people did not have Elle or Afisha magazines to rap them on the knuckles. But now people with the money not to shop at markets for their clothes are just as scared of fashion faux pas as anyone else.

Wear tight, revealing clothing and lashings of lipliner, and you might as well shout "up from the provinces" or "nouveau riche and hasn't gotten around to hiring a stylist."

It is the exceptions that prove the rule, and this month ballerina Anastasia Volochkova decided that it would be a good idea to publish photographs on her blog of herself lying on a beach completely nude.

Recently upbraided by it-girl Ksenia Sobchak for her taste in acrylic nails and permanent makeup, Volochkova doesn't have much sense and was seemingly unaware that she might be causing offence, since she was in the Maldives, a Muslim country.

She explained her decision to publish the snaps to the Moskovsky Komsomolets tabloid, saying that she'd been stalked by a photographer and decided to get some properly posed shots, as well as quash rumors that she had breast implants.

But she seemed outraged by the attention she caused.

"When I published photos from my concert, saying how great it was, no one raised an

eyebrow," she complained.

"But as soon as I showed my body, they turned on me. People in our country have completely degraded!"

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