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Miss Universe Contestants See Moscow, Avoid Controversy

By Christopher Brennan

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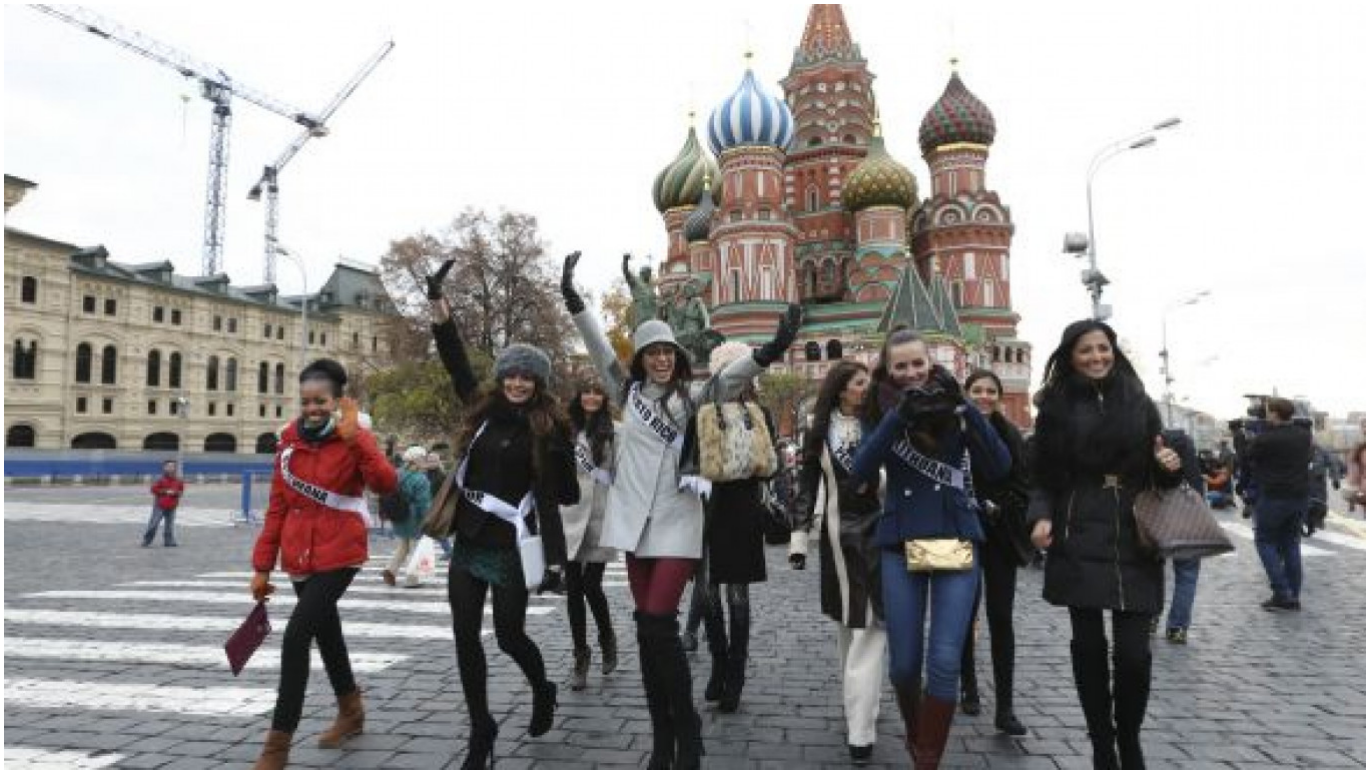

A gaggle of Miss Universe hopefuls strolled Red Square for a photo shoot last weekend prior to the contest. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Seeing scores of beautiful women in cocktail dresses is not particularly uncommon for Moscow, especially not in a setting like a money-soaked upscale restaurant. The city center may see an increase in turning heads, however, as the contestants for the 2013 Miss Universe beauty pageant have arrived in Moscow, where the competition is being held for the first time, and will spend the next two weeks preparing before the eventual finale Nov. 9.

Having already arrived and participated in a lingerie fashion shoot last week, the young women, who range in age from 18 to 27 and represent 87 different countries, held an opening dinner at the swanky restaurant Zafferano on Friday. As representatives from their countries' national pageants, the group will compete in the preliminary round Nov. 5 after a week of photo shoots, fashion shows and meetings with fans. The final event will then be televised live from Crocus City Hall at 5 a.m., a time that is probably more aimed towards audiences

on the U.S. East Coast than Moscow viewers.

The president of the Miss Universe organization, Paula Shugart, said Friday that the pageant would reveal all the judges next week but mentioned that Sports Illustrated supermodel, Anne Vyalitsyna, would join previously-announced judge Steven Tyler of Aerosmith along with a team of other Russian judges. The jury will be joined by the competition's hosting duo, former "scary" Spice Girl Melanie Brown and MSNBC anchor Thomas Roberts.

Not everything is without controversy in the land of free champagne and B-list celebrities, however. Brown and Roberts are replacing the pageant's usual pair of presenters, Giuliana Rancic and Andy Cohen, the latter of whom refused to host the show because of recent anti-gay propaganda legislation and said he "did not feel right as a gay man stepping foot into Russia."The organization responded by issuing a statement saying the law is "diametrically opposed to the core values" of the competition and also hiring Roberts, who is gay and published an op-ed saying the show was "a huge, visible opportunity for LGBT people."

The reaction, stronger than that of other organizations like the International Olympic Committee, prompted the thought that the contest could act as a platform for criticizing homophobia. Though contestants may be asked pressing questions on stage during the final, at Friday's dinner, which was followed by a small concert, the young women were not open to speaking out. Erin Brady, the reigning Miss U.S.A., who will share an apartment with the eventual winner in New York City, said she and her fellow contestants avoid the question, as it is most of the women's first time both at Miss Universe and in Russia and they are focused on enjoying the experience. Miss Bahamas Lexi Wilson said that most of what she knew about Russia before coming here was the country's politics, but when asked about her feelings on the anti-gay law she told The Moscow Times, "I would like to keep that private." Short of photo-ops on Red Square and the unavoidable video montage of women and monuments that will follow, the pageant seems to want little connection to Russia or its laws, and the actual NBC event will probably look incredibly similar to one being held in Las Vegas or Burbank, California.

While the controversies surrounding Miss Universe may focus on the differences between countries and cultures, the women praised the beauty and personalities of their international counterparts. Miss Russia, Elmira Abdrazakova, played hostess to a horde of Russian press that was keen on asking the contestants whether they were single — most of them are not — and said she had become good friends with the other girls, particularly mentioning Miss Poland. Other contestants bounced around the party in geographic groups, like the Scandinavian trio of Miss Finland, Miss Norway and Miss Sweden or a group of Caribbean contestants.

While "new friends" was a commonly occurring refrain throughout the night, there was still an air of competition. Perhaps for fear of ruining their figures ahead of the swimsuit competition, the women, who also cannot drink alcohol, did not go for the food provided by Zafferano, and at the end of Friday night had left nearly a full buffet of bliny and potatoes untouched. The beauty queens were then whisked back to their hotel to get their beauty sleep.

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