The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Loses, but Proud to Host Miss Universe

By Lena Smirnova

November 10, 2013



Miss Venezuela racked up Venezuela's 7th Miss Universe victory. South American countries have squeezed out European contenders in recent years. **Maxim Shemetov**

See the Photo Gallery: Miss Universe in Moscow

Miss Venezuela, Maria Gabriela Isler, swept aside 85 contestants to give her country its seventh Miss Universe crown during the competition final in Moscow's Crocus City Hall on Saturday night.

Although Russia's beauty queen failed to make it into the top 16, the event left Russian organizers and celebrities beaming with patriotism that their country managed to host an event of this scale, and some already asking for the next pageant dose.

"I can't describe all the things that I'm feeling at this moment. I'm shaking and I don't believe it," 25-year-old Isler said moments after being crowned Miss Universe 2013. "Maybe

tomorrow I'll wake up and say, oh my gosh, it's me, but right now I'm still shocked."

Isler successfully navigated the swimsuit, evening gown and interview portions of the pageant to win the top spot. Spain's Patricia Rodriguez was the first runner up, followed by Constanza Baez from Ecuador, Ariella Arida from the Philippines and Brazil's Jakelyne Oliveira.

"For me it's like winning because it's the first time that my country got so close to the crown," said Miss Ecuador after the show. "Now I only want to see my people and go to my country because I'm so proud and I hope that they're proud too."

This year's judging panel included Aerosmith frontman Steven Tyler, gold medal figure skater Tara Lipinski, Nizhny Novgorod-born model Anne V, chef Nobu Matsuhisa, television host Carol Alt, watch designer Italo Fontana, haircare businessman Farouk Shami and Russian pop star Filipp Kirkorov.

Kirkorov left his two young children at home with their grandfather and put on "a little something that came in a box from Milan" — specifically, a leather jacket with golden studs, sequin shirt, ripped pants and gold-tipped sneakers — to make his debut as an international show judge.

Oxana Fedorova, Russia's contestant, who won the Miss Universe pageant in 2002 but later gave up her crown, and last year's winner Olivia Culpo set the benchmark by which Kirkorov said he would pick this year's winner. Kirkorov's mother also played a role in setting the modern standard of beauty.

"My mom was a brunette and I'll be looking for my mom's features in the next winner," Kirkorov said. He then went on to voice his support for Misses Russia, Ukraine and Bulgaria before catching himself. "I've said too much. I can't say all this because I'm a member of the jury."

The contestants got up early and rehearsed for most of the days leading up to Saturday's final, like Guyana's Katherina Roshana Khan who said she had been up since 5 a.m. By the time the show kicked off at 10 p.m, all walking parades, as well as dances set to the music of Panic! At the Disco and Crocus Group vice-president Emin Agalarov, were perfectly tuned and choreographed.

But for some the show swerved off course as soon as the top 16 were announced.

"I was confident, 100 percent, that I would be in the top 16, but it seems that my confidence didn't lead anywhere," said Miss Russia Elmira Abdrazakova, making an effort not to ruin her ample eye makeup with tears as she stood beside her mother at the entrance to the loud after party. "It's hard for me to speak about it now because I have so many emotions, emotions, emotions."

Miss Germany, Anne Julia Hagen, said she was surprised by the girls who made it to the top and added that she had some European favorites who did not even make it to the second round.

Russia's Fedorova was the last European to win Miss Universe, which has lately been

dominated by Latin American contestants, including two consecutive wins by Venezuela in 2008 and 2009.

"I really believe in European girls. And I was so sorry for Russia. I mean, why didn't she place? She was so awesome!" Miss Germany said. "I don't give up the hope that one day a European girl will rock the stage again."

Music producer and gold medal figure skater Yevgeny Pluschenko's wife, Yana Rudkovskaya, cautioned ahead of the show that this would not be Russia's triumphant year, but was nonetheless optimistic about the legacy of the contest, which was held in the country for the first time.

"Our country needs a lot of things and this contest brings a certain status with it. There's a reason why Russia's main television channel is broadcasting the show," Rudkovskaya said.

Donald Trump, real estate mogul and owner of the Miss Universe contest, walked the red carpet mimicking his iconic "you're fired" gesture and warmly welcoming Crocus City Hall's owners Aras and Emin Agalarov to photograph with him.

About 17 countries, including China and Brazil, are vying to host Miss Universe next year, but Trump indicated that he would like for the contest to eventually return to Russia.

"We might be back here again," Trump said after the show. "In future years we'll definitely come back. We love it."

Trump also praised Emin Agalarov's singing ability, though the businessman-turned-singer had to dodge some uncomfortable questions on the red carpet about how much of a factor his talent was in putting him in the evening's performance lineup among award-winning musicians Steven Tyler and Panic! At the Disco.

For the beauty contestants, the event was a chance to sample some of Russia's tourism potential. Miss Germany lamented that they only saw the Kremlin and Red Square in the three weeks of being in Moscow because of the show's tight rehearsal schedule. She added that she would have to come back to see more.

Miss Guyana got some valuable advice from her president to make sure she spent her time in Moscow wisely. President Donald Ramotar had studied in Russia and eagerly shared his knowledge of the country and its history with the beauty queen.

"It was such an honor to finally see the Kremlin and Red Square. I really enjoyed it," Khan said.

Moe Set Wine was Myanmar's first contestant to make it to the Miss Universe pageant in 53 years and to celebrate this, she did not come to Russia alone. Relatives, embassy staff and foreign students deafeningly chanted their support for her during semifinal and final shows at Crocus Hall.

Wine did not make it to the final 16, but said she hoped her presence at the pageant this year will open up doors for future contestants from her country.

"Miss Venezuela definitely is very stunning, beautiful and intelligent. Her walk is perfect. Myanmar needs to prepare more because we're not experienced and we don't have any instructors to guide us," Wine said. "We're changing though, a lot, and moving towards international standards."

And if any contestants were feeling particularly low about their final results in the pageant, Russian hairstylist and singer Sergei Zverev was on hand to comfort them, saying that they were destined to lose the contest before it even began. The "only real queen of the universe" that Zverev chose to recognize was ousted Bolshoi ballerina Anastasia Volochkova.

Zverev said he "dragged her out of the house today because the real queen of the universe needs to be present, to see those starting out."

"Nobody has any chance of winning because there can only be one queen of the universe," Zverev said, clutching a beaming Volochkova around the waist. "But it's never too late to try."

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Original url:
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