

Russia's Cosmo girls – British Journalism Review

By Wendy Sloane

It's official: Russia is a nation of wankers. At least that's what the Russian edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine concluded in the mid-1990s when it conducted its first sex survey. Russian women, as opposed to their European and American counterparts, were happy to look the other way when their husbands had girlfriends, and weren't averse to cheating themselves. And *masturbatsiya* ranked high on their list of favourite activities.

"Their sexual morals were much more open and free than they were in the West at the time," says Ellen Verbeek, now 61, a Dutch journalist who became *Cosmo's* first co-editor way back in 1994, alongside Russian Elena Myasnikova, 62. "They just didn't openly talk about it that much."

The survey results were not just anecdotal. *Cosmopolitan Russia* was an extraordinary success, growing rapidly as soon as its first issue hit the shelves in 1994 with 50,000 copies. In 2005 the magazine entered the Guinness Book of World Records for the highest magazine circulation in the world outside the USA, with over one million copies a month. Celebrated as the country's first true Western *glantsevyi*, or glossy, women's magazine, it both shocked and satisfied Russian women with its steady diet of sex, celebs and sultry beauty tips that rivalled, and often mirrored, the US, Australian and UK editions for scintillating content.

Cosmopolitan Russia is still (partly) about sex, but times have changed. With more magazines on the market, not to mention a wealth of content for women on the Internet, *Cosmopolitan* now has half the circulation it had in the post-Soviet mid-late 1990s. And the content is starting to look decidedly different than it did just a few years ago. While the website currently boasts articles about *Best sex with a reality TV star!*, *Flashers: why do they do it?* and *The right to orgasm*, this October's cover - which features an in-house interview with Angelina Jolie - has no mention of sex at all.

"We used to just write about sex, relationships and careers," says current Deputy Editor Marina Dolgova, 40, who has been at the magazine for a decade. "Now we also write about money, ecology and the environment. We stay away from politics, however. There are lots of other magazines that do that. We need to find a middle ground."

The drop in circulation marks changes in Russia as much as in the global media landscape and the demise of the print journalism industry. Says Muscovite Yuliya Ivanova, 22, who studies marketing at university: "I prefer to read *Cosmo* online. Why pay for something when you can get it from free?"

Two sister mags – *Cosmo Ukraine* and *Cosmo Kazakhstan* – are largely repackaged versions of *Cosmo Russia*, with a few local articles thrown in, says Dolgova. They are both published in Russian, and were chosen from all former Soviet republics as they were the biggest in terms of population, income and potential advertising revenue.

Dolgova, who has worked her way up the ranks, says *Cosmo's* remit is changing. It used to be the only source of trusted information for young women: now there are many. "Despite that, I know readers who started reading us when they were 15, and now they read us with their daughters," she said. "We have a responsibility to them to bring them material they can believe in."

To achieve this they've adopted campaigns; their most recent about domestic violence. This was brought to the forefront in 2017 when the Duma, or parliament, got the backing of the Russian Orthodox Church to decriminalize domestic violence when it happens infrequently, and when no "substantial" injury occurs. Estimates say that up to 14,000 women die each year in the country at the hands of their partners.

“We’ve been discussing this a lot because the laws state that a man won’t go to jail if he beats up his wife. We think that’s wrong and we want to do something about it,” says Dolgova, speaking from their sleek Moscow office. Adds Senior Editor Kseniya Onosova, 30: “We have a social mission to not just tell girls about trends in fashion but about important things as well. We have no laws that protect women, so that’s one of our big projects.”

Vladimir Putin, in conjunction with the Church, has been trying to impose more conservative values, so some topics are now off-limits. In 2013, he passed a law banning the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors”. One of its tenets expressly forbids making lifestyles that are “sexually non-traditional” attractive, known colloquially as the “anti-gay propaganda law”.

Today’s readers of Cosmopolitan may not even remember how groundbreaking the magazine was in 1994. The brainchild behind the generation of post-Soviet “Cosmo girls” was Derk Sauer, once a teenage Maoist who in 1989 left Amsterdam for Moscow with his wife, Verbeek, to set up Moscow Magazine, a joint venture between Dutch publisher Elsevier and the Union of Soviet Journalists. When circulation began to nose-dive he founded the daily Moscow Guardian, the precursor to the English-language newspaper Moscow Times.

“We came up with the idea of a women’s magazine because we were so desperate for money with the Moscow Times. We were in huge debt, we couldn’t pay any more bills, and I was resigned to pack up and go back to Holland,” says Sauer, speaking via Skype from his yacht in Croatia. “Then Ellen said: why don’t we start a women’s magazine? She wanted to do Elle but I said, if we do a woman’s magazine let’s do the biggest. So we went with Cosmo.”

Verbeek admits that launching Cosmo wasn’t a very original idea. It was 1994, and only three mainstream national women’s magazines existed in Russia at the time: *Krestyanka* (Peasant Woman), *Rabotnitsa* (Working Woman) and *Burda*, a German-Russian sewing joint venture backed by Raisa Gorbacheva, wife of the former Soviet president. So Sauer and Verbeek made contact with George Green, then head of Hearst International Editions, who went on to become its President and CEO. At the time, Verbeek recalls, only “seven or eight” international Cosmos existed. “After we bought the licence for Russia, Green gave us a lot of freedom to do what we wanted,” she says.

Verbeek and Myasnikova, who started her career as a translator for Moscow Magazine, began combing English-language editions of Cosmo for ideas. They also asked potential readers about their interests. The answer: sex, relationships and beauty, in that order. Myasnikova recalls her father asking what the first issue was about. “I said sex, beauty, fashion and careers. He read the launch issue and then said: ‘I don’t get it. What are you going to write about in the second issue?’”.

The magazine, initially a 50/50 joint venture between Hearst and Independent Media, which Sauer founded, was the first in post-Soviet Russia to tell women that they didn’t have to rely on abortion as birth control, and the first to talk openly about dealing with abusive partners. International articles were lifted, crafted and adapted to a home-grown readership, Verbeek says. Cramped housing conditions in post-Soviet blocks of flats, for example, meant that a piece about how to have sex while your mother-in-law is sleeping in the adjacent room was particularly popular.

“In Europe, women read women’s magazines for fun but in Russia, Cosmo became a Bible, a lesson book. We became everyone’s big sister,” Verbeek recalls. “The impact on Russia was huge. We even had letters from girls dividing their lives into ‘Before Cosmo’ and ‘After Cosmo’.”

It’s not surprising that overnight success followed, and it’s easy to see why. The public discussion of sex was traditionally taboo in Soviet times, a fact immortalised back in 1986, when a Russian woman blurted out: “We have no sex in the USSR!” on live television during an international satellite link-up. In the early days of Boris Yeltsin’s reign in the 1990s, that all changed.

“Pornography began to be sold in underpasses and in the underground, badly shot sex pictures on grainy grey paper with naughty words underneath,” says Myasnikova. “But Cosmo was different. We were more up-market. We chose our words carefully and we wrote about sex openly but not offensively. There were no complaints at the time but the intelligentsia who read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy looked down on us.”

Luckily for Cosmo, the highbrows were in the minority. The colourful glossy printed on high quality paper began to fly off shelves in kiosks and supermarkets, which had the freedom to set their own prices. In Moscow the initial cost was about £2.50 while in the Far East that doubled, due to transportation costs. “Schoolgirls would buy it collectively, and initially each bought copy was read by about six people. That ratio changed to 1:3 as the readership became richer and most girls could afford a copy of their own,” says Myasnikova. Wholesalers were offered highly coveted fridges as prizes to entice them to sell more although the bulk of revenue came from ads.

While £2.50 was a lot by Russian standards, editors say the price reflected value for money. Russian law mandates that no publication can have more than 40 percent advertising content, and a lot of ads meant that in the early years the publication reached 500 pages to keep up the ratio. Now there are fewer ads and Cosmo has slimmed down, to about 300 pages.

The most serious rival was – and still is - Russian Glamour. To stay ahead, Cosmo not only launched the handbag-sized version of the mag in Russia before Glamour did but continued publishing in two formats. Eventually editors took the decision to reduce circulation after Putin introduced a law mandating that any publication with a circulation above one million was ‘of national importance’ and subject to government scrutiny.

The editors also discovered that its readership was not always ready for the topics broached in the magazine. Former Cosmo editor Polina Sokhranova, who edited the magazine from 2014 until 2017, went out on a limb and published an article about a child with lesbian mums, keeping faces hidden. “We had no backlash but the article wasn’t that popular,” she says. She also published the “I found out my husband was gay” women’s mag staple – which wasn’t well-received. “Our focus groups showed that our readers mainly wanted articles on how to be loved, how to be rich, how to be beautiful and how to be eternally young,” she said.

Dolgova says today they wouldn’t risk running any articles featuring gay or lesbian couples. “We are a very progressive team but that’s something we can’t write about now,” she says.

In 2014, Cosmo Kazakhstan editor, Maya Akisheva, told Cosmo online that her magazine was gay-friendly. “I hope we are not affected by what is happening in Russia — this nationwide homophobic trend. I think there is a possibility of that happening because our politicians look at what is going on in this big country,” she was quoted as saying.

Cosmo today is owned by Fashion Press, made up of Hearst and the Russian Inventure Partners, which has an 80 percent stake. In 2014 Russia passed a law forbidding foreigners from owning more than 20 percent of a media outlet, with one of the bill’s authors declaring it would help protect Russia’s interests from Western influence. A 2015 bid for Hearst’s Russian partner, Hearst Shkulev, to acquire foreign partner Sanoma’s share of Fashion Press was turned down by the national anti-monopoly body (in 2005, Sauer sold Independent Media to SanomaWSOY for €142 million).

Despite a change of ownership, Cosmo is continuing with a recipe that works: a steady diet of beauty tips, relationship advice, sex and celebs – both international and Russian. “We adapt articles, like big interviews, to suit our Russian readers – we don’t just translate them,” Dolgova says. Recent covers featured glamorous actress and politician Ksenia Sobchak, who ran for the presidency in 2018; Georgian singer Ketiv Topuria, and Aida Garifullina, an operatic soprano who graced one of the 25-year jubilee issues.

It's a far cry from the earliest days of Cosmo, when celebs didn't exist. "To be honest, to have an interest in celebs you need celebs. We had Alla Pugacheva and that was about it," says Myasnikova, referring to the frizzy-haired Soviet crooner, whose single *Million Scarlet Roses* was a huge hit in the 1980s. "Celebs" in the early post-launch days included politician Irina Khakamada, news anchor Tatyana Mitkova, political commentator Leonid Parfyonov and Konstantin Ernst, CEO of Russian Channel One.

Dolgova says the choice of people to feature reflects a changing attitude in the country – the launch featured Cindy Crawford on the cover, now the magazine showcases not just models but women of substance. Ten years ago, young Russian women wanted to look like Barbies, with lip fillers, heavily styled hair and heavy make-up, she says. "Now they want to look more natural and sporty, more healthy."

With increasing competition and an ageing core readership, Russian Cosmo will have to work hard to keep its readers. "In the beginning it changed lives but it's lost its impact now, it's like any women's magazine in the west," says Verbeek. She now edits Yoga Journal, which soon will celebrate its 15 anniversary in Russia. "But that's a good thing. That's evolution."

The writer worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989-1995 and has been a magazine editor in the UK for Eva magazine, Marie Claire and Woman's Own. She now freelances for the Sunday Times, among others, and is an Associate Professor and the Journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University.