

# OLENA ZELENSKA ON THE COVER OF VOGUE; "CRITICIZED AND PRAISED"

by Karin Winroth

**F**ashion has always kept an eye on the army. Few sources of inspiration have been used so regularly and for so long. On the catwalk and on the fashion scene we see uniforms, khaki, army green, cargo pants, camouflage patterns and combat boots. However, when fashionable pop culture refers to war, it has primarily been to economic combat. There may be new markets that lure the vision of the fashion industry. When India emerges as an attractive market, the fashion designers include saris in their collections. When haute couture is in demand in the Middle East, collections are inspired by *The Arabian Nights*. And when the Russian market for luxury fashion opened up in the 2010s, there was a search for the faces who would "open the doors" to this market of extravagance.<sup>1</sup> However, when Olena Zelenska, the first lady of Ukraine, is on the front cover of *Vogue* in the middle of an international crisis due to the Russian war against Ukraine, the fashion magazine comes to relate to war from another perspective.

In July 2022 the digital version of the American and Ukrainian *Vogue* had Olena Zelenska on the cover. The digital version previews the paper issue to be published in October, also including an interview. The photos in the portrait were taken by the celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz and show a beautiful woman living her present days in a country at war. The photos are beautiful, but also mirror the pressured situation. They illustrate life in the basement, with sandbags round the walls to support the building in case it is bombed. Another photo is taken at Antonov Airport where Zelenska is surrounded by female soldiers. There are no smiles in the photos, rather an air of sorrow.

Even though it is not uncommon for



**"ZELENSKA IS ACCUSED OF STEALING THE SPOTLIGHT FROM THE WOMEN ACTUALLY SERVING AS SOLDIERS."**

first ladies of various countries to be pictured on the cover of *Vogue*, this time it stirred some concern. There have been heated discussions on social media. Why does the most prestigious fashion magazine in the world offer their front cover to a first lady defending her country, a country unknown for its design and fashion? And why does she accept? There were considerable discussions on the matter and Zelenska has been both criticized and praised for taking this opportunity.<sup>23</sup> The critics claim that a fashion magazine is not the appropriate arena for discussing a subject as sensitive as warfare. They consider that the article is only selling through glamorizing

the war. Zelenska is accused of stealing the spotlight from the women actually serving as soldiers. Some also claim she is promoting what they call a cult around Zelenskyy. However, having read the text this kind of criticism is hard to understand. Peter Dickinson, editor of the Atlantic Council's Ukraine Alert service, suggests that most of this criticism is coming from Russia, Russian proxies and people critical of their countries' support for Ukraine.

**THE PRAISE** comes from those who consider that Zelenska is using every possibility she has to reach out to new audiences to spread understanding of the situation in Ukraine. How they count and keep counting the number of innocent children among the dead. How the younger ones can no longer go to school regularly due to continual attacks. And not least, what it is like for her and her children to be the second prime target for the Russian army (the number one being her husband). How the family is split up for security reasons, regularly changing their positions. How her husband Volodymyr Zelenskyy has not met his children since the war started. And how she struggles to cope with the continuing stress of the situation. Vanessa Friedman, of *The New York Times*, comments on the social media turbulence and the article:

**"[...]you can't dispute the fact that it once again put the war of Ukraine in the headlines – and in the minds of people who may not have been following it as closely as others. In that context, her interview is not just an interview. It's a battle strategy."<sup>24</sup>**

The portrait also sparked a discussion of how you "Sit-Like-A-Girl". Some read-



## “INCREASINGLY, THEY ARE POSTING WITH #SITLIKEAGIRL ON SOCIAL MEDIA PHOTOS OF THEMSELVES IN THE SAME POSITION AS ZELENSKA TAKES IN THE VOGUE PHOTO.”

ers were critical of the sitting position of Zelenska on the front cover, thinking it was too masculine. A number of women posted comments of defense in answer to the criticism of the interview and not least on the critique of the posture on the cover. Increasingly, they are posting with #SitLikeAGirl on social media photos of themselves in the same position as Zelenska takes in the *Vogue* photo.<sup>5</sup>

Zelenska was aware that the *Vogue* interview might cause some concern. She was not, however, expecting all the turbulence that was to follow in social media. But the posting of hashtags on #Sit-Like-A-Girl seemed to really touch her heart.

**‘I hope our women will never let anyone tell them how to sit, dress, or work’ she continues.<sup>6</sup>**

**OLENA ZELENSKA** was called Olena Kiyashko before her marriage. Like her husband she was raised in a Russian speaking household, her father being a professor at a technical school and her mother an engineer and manager in a construction company. Like her husband, she was 11 when the Berlin Wall fell and in junior high school when Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. The couple met in their hometown Kryvyi Rih, in southeast Ukraine, during high school. At university Zelenska graduated with a degree in architecture, while Zelenskyy graduated in law. Quite soon after their university years, Zelenskyy and some friends founded a group present-

ing satirical comedy. The comedy troupe soon became increasingly popular, so in 2003 they started a production company called Kwartal 95, a company also including Zelenska. The production company became one of the largest in the Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking world. Zelenska preferred to stay out of the limelight, but became an asset for the firm as she was a writer. She wrote scripts for several programs, for example, *Evening Kwartal*, for several years. In 2015 the television series *Servant of the People* was initiated, starring Zelenskyy as a high school teacher who criticizes the ruling class for corruption, and later finds himself elected president of Ukraine. Consequently, Zelenskyy first appeared as the president of Ukraine in this comedy before circumstances changed thoroughly and he took on the role in real life. Sometimes life imitates fiction.

Naturally, Zelenskyy becoming president completely changed the family’s life. Zelenska was upset when Zelenskyy wanted to run for office, but she also wanted to respect his choice. Their life transformed even more on February 24 when the Russia initiated their so-called “special operation”. Zelenska told the *Vogue* reporter:

**“The first weeks after the war broke out, we were just shocked”. And she adds: “After Bucha, we understood it was a war intended to exterminate us all. A war of extermination.”<sup>7</sup>**

Trying to reach out to audiences through various magazines seems like a strategy grown out of necessity.

*Vogue* is the world’s oldest fashion magazine, established in the US in 1892 by Arthur Baldwin Turner. He ran the magazine until his death. In 1905 the magazine was bought by Condé Nast, one of the largest publishing houses in the world. The British edition of the magazine was first published in 1916 and the first French *Vogue* in 1920. The magazine is still published in the US but also has a number of local versions. Even though labelled as a fashion magazine, the chief editors have influenced the magazine in various directions over time, also contributing to the trend of fashion publishing. Diana Vreeland, chief editor of American *Vogue* from 1963 to 1971, is presented as a person who shaped the magazine to mirror not only fashion, but also the cultural, social, and political currents of the time, as well as the sexual revolution. So the fashion industry shaped *Vogue*, but *Vogue* also shaped the fashion industry and influenced what readers expect to find inside a fashion magazine. Legendary in our time is the French editor Carine Roitfeld (2001–2011), daughter of the Russian-born film producer Jacques Roitfeld, known for her style as well as for introducing a bolder photographic approach in the French version of the magazine. Even more widely known is Anna Wintour, who was initially editor of the British *Vogue* from 1985 to 1987 but has now been in charge of the American edition since 1988. She

is also portrayed in a book, later a film, called *The Devil wears Prada*.<sup>8</sup>

**BOTH RUSSIA** and Ukraine have their own version of the magazine, mirrored in the language as well as the photographic and fashion style. However, as of April this year *Vogue* Russia closed due to the “rise in censorship”. Condé Nast has announced the closure of the franchise due to the new censorship laws. The magazine was presented as having more than 800 000 readers at the time, and was the most-read high-end fashion magazine in the country before the closure.

The title of the interview with Zelenska is “A Portrait of Bravery – Ukraine’s First Lady Olena Zelenska”.<sup>9</sup> It follows the discourse of communication set by the Ukrainian government. Part of the fight against the Russian invasion is the communication strategy using the tagline: “Bravery. To be Ukraine”.<sup>10</sup> As Associate Professor Nadia Kaneva underlines, the strategy is to position Ukraine in the mind of the world as well as relate Ukrainians to a specific character and quality.<sup>11</sup>

In recent decades, nation branding has become progressively more pervasive. Branding has been introduced widely as a tool for positioning not only products but also political parties and non-commercial organizations as well as nations.<sup>12</sup> In contemporary society, branding aims to influence perception and behavior rather than to focus on a specific exchange. Branding practice has become as much about culture as it is about economics. It is about the stories we tell about ourselves, how we organize ourselves in the world.<sup>13</sup> The Ukrainian government has most sincerely adopted this, trying to maintain the world’s awareness of the conflict on Ukrainian territory and the qualities of the Ukrainian people.

The portrait of Zelenska in *Vogue* is a strategy to reach new audiences and to illustrate another angle of the situation in Ukraine, according to Zelenska herself. It is in the interest of the country that the world is reminded of the ongoing conflict, as Ukraine depends on support from the outside world. The interview in *Vogue* also presents the conflict through a different voice than those reporting on the



From Olena Zelenska’s official Instagram.

news. The news covers battles, numbers of the dead, and weapons. This interview shows a civilian woman’s side of the war, under just as much pressure as the soldiers with weapons, but in different ways.

When talking about fashion, the images are very subtle and sophisticated. They are simple, showing the clothes discreetly. They also portray a beautiful woman, with big green-brown eyes, her hair loose, looking natural and serious. She represents a natural beauty not often seen today in fashion magazines, as facial surgery has become a regular habit in the world. If the fashion scene needs a new trend – which it usually does – being natural would offer a possibility. In addition, articles such as this one are usually presented with extravagant fashion photos, clearly informing the reader about the designer brands used. But this time the names of the Ukrainian designers are only mentioned in the small print below the images. In the physical publication this is even more discreet, showing the designer names only in connection with the last photo.

**IT SHOULD BE** mentioned that Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been on the cover of a number of magazines<sup>14</sup> and Olena Zelenska has been on the cover of *Time*, for example.<sup>15</sup> However, the cover of *Vogue* evoked more intense emotions and reactions in social media. This leads us further to the question of *Vogue*’s interest in this matter. Why is a fashion magazine reaching out to a country in distress? Are they

trying to stay relevant when the world is turning to an even more politically polarized setting? Do they once more wish to have the status of mirroring the cultural, social and political currents of the times?

In any case, social media has become a powerful weapon in our time. When the magazine *Vogue* (US) was published in October 2022, Zelenska was no longer on the cover. The interview “Portrait of Bravery” is still intact and extended. This time the social media storm about the digital article is discussed and commented upon. The cover, though, shows a photo of the American actress Jennifer Lawrence. On the front page there is a text relating to the Zelenska article, titled “Courage under fire – Ukraine’s Olena Zelenska”. For sure, there were debates within the power circle within the publishing house of how to relate to the social media turbulence. And for sure Anna Wintour, nowadays also Global Editorial Director of the *Vogue* Magazine, was involved.

Authenticity is said to be a strong “currency” in communication today.<sup>16</sup> Corporations, nations, and brands search in various ways for the correct strategy to present themselves as authentic. To be authentic is to be trustworthy, original, and true. However, being true in a world of ambiguity is a challenging strategy. The historian Sophia Rosenfeld vividly discusses how the line between fact and fiction is becoming increasingly obscure. In her book *Democracy and Truth – a short history*<sup>17</sup> she analyses the relation between the two concepts from a historical perspective. How the view of the truth can vary over time has been thoroughly illustrated in the European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Truth as a concept has, however, never been a political virtue, according to the writer. Rather, deception has been an accepted strategy for winning political favor. Discussing authenticity and branding in our times is as important as it is relevant. However, in the situation of the world today, there are many voices stating that Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Olena Zelenska do represent bravery. ✖

Karin Winroth is Associate Professor in Business Studies at the School of Social Studies, Södertörn University



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# WHAT HAPPENED TO THE RUSSIAN FASHION MAFIA?

by Karin Winroth

**D**uring the 2010s a new group entered the stage of fashion celebrities. A handful of young Russian women made their appearance on the international fashion scene and became known for their varied style, their charm, and their constellation.<sup>1</sup> They were seen as both exotic and inspiring, using the latest trends as well as Russian traditions for their looks. Appearing in a tiara and a feminine dress, or thigh high boots with a short skirt, made their looks surprising and cool – everything that the viral fashion industry needed. They were also seen as gate openers to the attractive market of luxury fashion in Russia, and were consequently used as models, guest designer and collaborators. All of a sudden, being Russian was related to being trendy and cool. And Russian designers started to show their collections at international Fashion Weeks. Privately, these women were married to or had close connections to Russia’s oligarchs, making the financing of their wardrobes something quite above the ordinary.

Even though there was a larger number of people involved in the cool Russian Fashion Pack, some individuals stood out as being at the heart of the Russian Fashion Mafia. Miroslava Duma (called Mira Duma) was often presented as the leader of the group, being an international digital fashion entrepreneur. Elena Perminova is a model, with a “Cinderella background”. Nowadays she has four children together with the former KGB agent Lebedev (also a publishing mogul and a Representative in the Duma). Ulyana Ser-

geenko was once a model but developed has her own fashion brand during the last decade. She was appointed “Look of the year” by Style.com in 2012, an appointment that became a sort of game-changer for the Russian fashionistas. Suddenly they were “the IT-girls”. Even if a bit more private, the designer Vika Gazinskaya was usually also mentioned as one of the people in the core Russian Mafia.

Though they all came to live in Moscow, most of these women were from other parts of Russia. Mira Duma and

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Elena Perminova both grew up in Siberia, and Ulyana Sergeenko originates from Kazakhstan. Vika Gazinskaya is the only one in the constellation who grew up in Moscow. This illustrates how these women became part of

the changing circumstances in Russia and the movement of people after the fall of the Soviet Union.

MIRA DUMA WAS earlier called “the force of the fashion industry” by the *Financial Times*,<sup>2</sup> and “the most connected digital entrepreneur” by *Vogue*.<sup>3</sup> She was also acknowledged in “The World Economic Forum Young Global Leader” (YGL), Class of 2018.<sup>4</sup> There she was recognized for her professional accomplishments, commitment to society, and potential to contribute to shaping the future of the world through leadership. However, due to a faux pas on social media, after she was accused of being both racist and homophobic, she dropped her public appearance and left the central stage of fashion. After the years of Covid closure, when the world was making socializing a possibil-



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

At the Paris Fashion Show in 2013. From left, Polina Kitsenko, owner of fashion shop Podium in Moscow, Elena Perminova, model, Natalia Vodionova, model, Ulyana Sergeenko, designer, Vika Gazinskaya, designer, and Mira Duma, digital entrepreneur in fashion.

ity once more, Putin attacked Ukraine in February 2022. This meant controversies about how Russians are seen in all industries, including in fashion. So, what has happened to the Russian Fashion Mafia? How did they survive the time of Covid and the internationally so noticed conflict between Russia and Ukraine?

The entrepreneurial star of the group, Mira Duma, had already resigned from the spotlight in 2018 when she was accused of overstepping social norms.<sup>5</sup> Coming from the East of Europe means that you do not always understand the “rules” of the West until it is too late. In addition, there were rumors of somebody or a group who wanted her away from the central fashion stage. In the early spring of 2018, she withdraw from all her assignments in the corporation she had contributed to shaping except from the Future Tech Lab, the firm she had created

by herself. In late 2019 she appeared again on Instagram, informing followers that she had been cured of a deadly disease. After this, her Instagram account mostly showed photos of her with her children, often going downhill skiing together. Her Instagram also contains images of environmentally friendly clothes from the brand Pangaia.

However, on February 24 photos of a different kind appeared on her Instagram account. As her parents had emigrated from Ukraine to Siberia, the family has close connections to their relatives still in Ukraine. At first Ms. Duma showed some photos of peaceful resistance of the war, including a photo of a man with a sign saying, “I am ashamed of being Russian”. The photos are no longer to be found on the account. The latest post (dated March 20, 2022) is a black image with the text, “day 24”, acknowledging that a dear



The latest post on Mira Duma's Instagram account.

member of the family passed away the previous night.<sup>6</sup> Not only is the family from Ukraine: In addition, Duma's father Vasily Duma was a senator in the Russian Federation from 2004 to 2011 as well as head of the Ukrainian diaspora between 2005 and 2012. As for her personal status,

official sources claim that Mira Duma is divorced from her husband Alexander Mikheev, as well as stating that she has never been divorced. In addition to Duma's account on Instagram, there is also a Mira Duma fan group on one account, showing her earlier outfits.<sup>7</sup> She is still remembered and cherished as an outstanding and inspiring fashionista.

**THE DESIGNER** Ulyana Sergeenko has continued to develop and show her own fashion brand.<sup>8</sup> You can find shows from her Spring Summer collection 2022 on YouTube. However, these films are from late January 2022, and subsequently there is nothing more recent. The latest post on her Instagram is from January 25, 2022. It has been hard to get in touch with both Mira Duma and Ulyana Sergeenko, according to sources. Rumors says they are worried about how the Kremlin might react if they act in public.<sup>9</sup> Both of them are still located in Russia.

Vika Gazinskaya was always the low-profile Russian of the group, not exposing very much of her private life. She still keeps her life private, but her design is vivid and visible. Her experience includes launching a guest collection in 2014 for & Other Stories, a brand owned by the Swedish retailer H&M. Gazinskaya is, however, mostly known for her own design branded under her name. Also, her latest collection, Fall Winter 2022–2023, is exposed on various sites on the Internet.<sup>10</sup>

**THE MOST VISUAL** Russian fashionista nowadays is the model, Elena Perminova. Her Instagram is still regularly updated.<sup>11</sup> The posts usually show herself in various outfits, or her visits at exotic and beautiful destinations. She does expose brands such as Bulgari and Prada on her account, so there are probably commercial interests involved in some of her posts. She is also the only one of the group who travels in Europe, for instance visiting Milan in



Model Elena Perminova and media mogul Alexander Lebedev in 2017.

September 2022, and in other parts of the world. There is a black image posted on February 24, 2022, but otherwise no references to Russia's war against Ukraine. Her children are sometimes shown on the views of Instagram, but her partner/

husband Alexander Lebedev very seldom appears in the images.

Alexander Lebedev is a former KGB agent, nowadays a media mogul. As of today, he is on Canada's sanction list due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, something that has stirred some attention in Britain. Lebedev's son, Evgeny Lebedev, has been a member of the House of Lords since 2020, and is also

owner of the *Evening Standard*, as well as other papers. Lord Evgeny Lebedev has condemned the invasion of Ukraine, and also encouraged Putin to withdraw his "military operation".<sup>12</sup> However, he also expresses understanding for the fact that every person with Russian roots is under

scrutiny under these circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

Political turbulence in Europe has always stirred economic changes and personal sacrifices. At the present time, however, this poisonous tonic involves nuclear weapons and climate change to a degree that make the consequences more perilous than ever. The flourishing Russian fashion market that seemed so attractive in the 2010s now seems to be dried up and barren. ✕

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