

Rita

Anastasia

Anna-Victoria

Ekaterina

Alexandra

Maria

They're single, smart, Russian

And they party like it's 1799

They arrive here from Kiev, St Petersburg and Moscow and reject clichés about oligarchs and new money. Richard Godwin meets the post-Soviet generation who dream of living like the Romanovs

PORTRAIT Dan Kennedy STYLING Rachael Dove

One by one, the debutantes float down the sweeping staircase of the enormous ballroom at Grosvenor House, the largest in Europe, they say. They have come in their own clothes – Isabel Marant and 3.1 Phillip

Lim, trendy denim and demure lace. You can tell they're a little nervous as they exchange pleasantries ("Akh, Chelsea, interesno ..."), update Instagram, check their make-up.

But this is merely a rehearsal. Next month, these fine specimens of Russian womanhood will perform this ritual in ivory gowns and bejewelled tiaras before 600 pairs of tear-dewed eyes. Candelabra will shimmer, bosoms will heave, dashing cavalry officers challenge one another to duels over their honour, and the great Russian violinist Yury Revich will play *The Dying Swan* on a Stradivarius.

For any ambitious Natasha Rostova wannabe in London, the Russian Debutante Ball has become the highlight of the social calendar, a once in a lifetime chance to party like it's 1799. "It is a fairytale to dance here," says Alexandra Mezhonova, 26, a St Petersburg beauty in a black lace dress. "Regardless of what century we are in, there should always be a space for fairytales." Anastasia Kachkovska, 21, from Kiev, Ukraine, is similarly wide-eyed. "I came to the ball last year just to watch. It was amazing. All the debutantes were just incredible. I felt so nostalgic ..."

The notion that Russian youth should be quite so enamoured of these arcane courtship rituals may seem strange to your average Londoner – particularly when the prevailing stereotypes of contemporary Russia run more along the espionage-hooligan-buying-up-all-our-nice-houses line, as opposed to the swirling romance of *War and Peace* or *Eugene Onegin*. Besides, debutantes balls were a fairytale that we were happy to dispel long ago. The last 400 or so English debts "came out" to society at the opening of the 1958 "season", curtsying their last to the Queen. Society matchmaking didn't fit with the egalitarian spirit. And besides: "We had to put a stop to it. Every tart in London was getting in," as Princess Margaret said.

Russia dispensed with its aristocratic traditions rather more violently back in 1917. However, for a new generation of post-Soviet Russians, that only makes the allure more potent. There's nothing exactly official about the Russian Debutante Ball but, since 2013, it has offered Russian-speaking émigrés (from Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, etc, as well as the Russian Federation) a chance to waltz, dine and network on ever grander stages. It is the brainchild of Elisabeth Smagin-Melloni, a



Last year's Russian Debutante Ball at Grosvenor House, London. Far right, from left: Rita Khabirova, 17; Ekaterina Zvyagintseva, 21; Anastasia Kachkovska, 21; Anna-Victoria Belikova, 24; Maria Polovtseva, 20; Alexandra Mezhonova, 26

formidable Viennese lady straight from the pages of a Chekhov story, who has organised similar events in Baden-Baden, Rome, Biarritz and Montreux. The entertainment will include the 60 debutantes performing Tchaikovsky's *Waltz of the Flowers* at the opening ceremony, as well as a midnight quadrille, and turns from eminent Russian musicians, opera singers and prima ballerinas.

Oh, there are a few concessions to the 21st century. The cavalry officers are, in all honesty, more likely to be dashing representatives of Gazprom or investment bankers; the debutantes are expected to dance the rumba as well as the mazurka. But that needn't shatter the illusion. As Smagin-Melloni puts it, "This is an experience their grandmothers would have had in tsarist Russia." (I'm sure she means great-great-grandmothers.) "There were always dancing events where people could bring their daughters, where they would meet people from their social class under the eyes of their families."

Not that the debutantes I meet seem particularly fussed about catching the eye of a dapper young billionaire. These are all proudly independent women from a generation with markedly different priorities from the bling-worshipping *novye russkie*

("new Russians") who thrived amid the ultra-capitalism of the Nineties. (Russian joke: first new Russian – "Look at my beautiful tie. It cost \$3,000." Second new Russian – "You've been had! Mine cost \$5,000.")

They have no memory of the USSR and no desire to go back there. Nor are they likely to wear lime-green Armani dresses or take phone calls in the opera; Smagin-Melloni interviews them personally to ensure that each one comports herself in a becoming fashion. Their parents tend to be doctors and lawyers as opposed to aluminium magnates or football-club hobbyists. They cite their favourite hangouts as Mari Vanna, the Knightsbridge restaurant that resembles the set from *The Cherry Orchard*, or Bob Bob Ricard, the luxe champagne and caviar joint, but generally say they prefer long conversations over tea. "It's not my money, so why should I spend it?" says one. "I am a rare member of the Russian middle class – I have nothing to do with any oligarchs," says another. "But we appreciate good quality and we try to maintain standards."

And all are striking it out in Britain alone. Ekaterina Zvyagintseva, 21, or "Kate", has been living here for eight years, long enough to have developed an incongruously northern accent ("I'm living with some northern lads

and I just picked it up," she says, blushing). Her mother runs a successful private nursery in Moscow, while her father is a venture capitalist. Like most of the debutantes, she arrived in her mid-teens to attend an English school – Millfield in Somerset – and is now studying chemistry at Imperial. "When I was 14, I just assumed everyone hated me. I really don't understand English humour still," she says. "English people are really rude to each other and think it's acceptable. But I've changed dramatically since I've been here. My mum always complains that I've become English."

Rita Khabirova is the youngest of the debts, a 17-year-old beauty from the Urals who persuaded her parents to send her here when she was 13. "It was my decision. I wanted to live an independent life," she says. Her sister had already gone to live in Austria, but she alighted on Britain because she admired our monarchy. "I used to be in love with the Duchess of Cambridge; I copied every outfit. But I was shocked when I arrived. I thought everyone would be so nice." Oh no! What happened? "I was a very open child, but boarding school changed me." Her year was dominated by Russian and Chinese pupils, she explains, and the pressure was intense. "Girls are so competitive. The more selfish you were,



What is the biggest misconception about Russians? 'That we're evil. And drink vodka'

the more accepted you were in the clique." She now goes to college in Kensington and resides in Chelsea, which she finds much more to her liking. After college, she tells me, she will study at the London School of Economics, take a City job and then set up her own stockbrokers.

All of them appreciate the opportunities that modern London has given them. Anna-Victoria Belikova, 24, has started a fashion business called Quintet with Georgian, Brazilian, Japanese and Chinese co-founders, something she admits would never have happened in Moscow. However, she has also gone about acquiring a decidedly 19th-century skills set – she used to ride horses for the Russian equestrian team to add to her new mazurka technique. "I would say 18th century, actually," she says. "The 19th century was much darker than anyone imagines it to be."

For Smagin-Melloni it is natural that the debutantes should seek one another out. Each one is encouraged to produce a male date, but the ball is not about matchmaking: "Girls in the west are not looking for husbands at 22. But they are looking for good friends who share their interests, who have good manners, who dress up in a nice way. The more modern girls become, the more they want to go back to the past. They might be very professional in their working lives but, for a short time, they get to feel like princesses." Mobile phones are strictly prohibited in the opening ceremony and drunkenness frowned upon.

As for the selection process, her standards are exacting. She doesn't quite operate the "face control" that holds sway in the more exclusive Moscow clubs, but she does have a "no elephants" rule. And the girls must make themselves presentable. "When we organised the ball in Moscow, all of the girls came for the last rehearsal in their own clothes. I thought, 'Who has chosen these girls? They are so ugly!' Then in the evening, when they were in their beautiful dresses with their hair and make-up done, I said, 'Did they change the girls?'"

She is sensitive to the charge that it's expensive. The debutantes pay £250 to be there, must attend five dance lessons and

01.10.16

MAGAZINE



Meet the VARDYS

Should Posh and Becks be worried?

SERGEI STEPANOV/RUSSIAN DEBUTANTE BALL LONDON, HAIR AND MAKE-UP: LAUREN ALICE AT HANNOY COARLEY REPRESENTS USING BUMBLE AND BUMBLE FOR HAIR AND CHANEL LE ROUGE COLLECTION NO 1 AND LE LIFT VILASH FOR MAKE-UP, ASSISTANT: CLARE HAYES, CLOTHES: MARY CHLOE AND BONICA CASIANA, PHOTOGRAPHED AT GROSVENOR HOUSE, LONDON

then acquire a regulation white or cream ballgown and tiara; regular tickets range from £290 to £590 for "Super VIP" places. But while many of the attendees are rich, a lot of the young ladies from Russia's "near abroad" – the Baltic states, Belarus, Moldova, etc – are often offered financial assistance. "You have no idea. Many of them sleep four to a room to save money. One of the girls could not afford a dress but made one out of curtains," says Smagin-Melloni. And while most in London come from marketing, fashion or finance, she's not fussed about where they work. "In Moscow, one of the girls told me she was working with semen. I got confused with the Russian word and thought she meant flower seeds. But no, she was taking the ejaculation of bulls and putting it into cows! But she was incredibly beautiful, so we let her in."

Above all, she wants them to draw attention away from politics for a while. "I am married to a Russian. After the fall of the Soviet Union, everyone liked Russians. But then the impression was all oligarchs, criminals, primitive people, hooligans. Here, the young debutantes get to show the positive sides of Russian culture: music, food, dancing. It's also very important."

And Russia's current relations with the West go some way to explain why the fairytale is so potent. Britain and Russia have long eyed one another with a mixture of suspicion and fascination; currently, it's fair to say that suspicion dominates. Ever since the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, relations between London and Moscow have been tetchy. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea and non-linear war in Ukraine, and the inscrutable role of Vladimir Putin in propping up Bashar al-Assad in Syria, there has been talk of a new Cold War. When it comes to their president, the debutantes are demure. "I have lots of British friends and they ask me a lot about politics. I really don't like it," sighs Maria Polovtseva, 20, who is studying geology at King's College. What's the biggest misconception about Russians?

"That we're evil. And drink vodka. But mostly that we're evil." Are you evil? "No! But people assume that the actions of your country's leaders represent the general population. It's a problem." Kate agrees. She feels that British people have a narrow view of what Russians are like. "It is quite awful. There used to be a 'new money' stereotype. Now it's almost become worse – it's very political."

It's compounded by a culture clash that often inspires Russians to socialise together, insists Alexandra, who works in fashion. "I'm always happy to make friendships with anyone from the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States – the successor to the Soviet Union]. I appreciate the Russian mentality," she says. What is the Russian mentality? "The first



The 2015 Russian Debutante Ball

'We often try to be close to British people, but they just don't let us'

word that comes to my mind is sincerity. Sometimes we are very direct and it seems rude. But when you speak to a Russian, you can clearly feel what they feel. I appreciate the British politeness, because it makes you feel more comfortable, but it is difficult for us to build deep friendships with you. We are not really sure what the British want."

Kate agrees. "We often try to be close to British people, but they just don't let us, so we end up seeking other Russians. British people think we're so closed and rude. In reality, we're protecting ourselves. Once a Russian gets to know someone, we'll open our whole soul to them. With British people, it's backwards. You're very open and chatty. But as soon as anyone tries to get close, you shut down."

Still, while everyone insists that the ball is not a platform for politics, that's not to say that all this tsarist nostalgia is mere dressing up. Last year, an official from Putin's United Russia party wrote to the last surviving Romanovs – Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna and Prince Dimitri Romanovich Romanov – asking them to return to the Motherland from France to "revive the spiritual power of Russian people" as the nation "goes through a difficult process of restoring its greatness and returning its global influence". Putin has long sought to build modern Russian identity around this longing. He has replaced a Soviet-era national holiday (commemorating the October Revolution) with a tsarist-era holiday (celebrating the liberation of Moscow from the Poles in 1613). He has led Gove-style revisions in school textbooks to clarify certain points about imperial Russia's glorious history and, back in 2013, sponsored lavish celebrations

for the 400th anniversary of the Romanovs' ascent to the throne.

There's a restoration spirit at the ball, too. Tsar Nicholas II's great niece, the Princess Olga Romanoff, is the patron. She resides in the UK and was once talked up as a possible breeding partner for our very own Prince Charles. They'd have had a fair bit in common: her great-grandmother (the Empress Maria Feodorovna, wife of Tsar Alexander III) and his great-great grandmother (Queen Alexandra, wife of Edward VII) were sisters.

In many ways the ball represents a counter-factual historical enactment: imagine what Russia might have become if it hadn't been for those pesky Bolsheviks.

"My mother is a big fan of the Romanovs," says Rita. "She took me to all of their palaces and museums from an early age. The last generation were really special: very loving, very caring, very educated." She feels it wouldn't be a bad idea for Russia to restore them to the throne. "It's tradition. And I think it makes the country economically stronger."

Anna-Victoria also seems to have taken the fall of the Romanov dynasty pretty hard. "Even now, it's almost one century ago and we get very emotional about it," she says. "The revolution impacted our families as well as our country. My relatives had to move out of Russia and we lost so much of our heritage. At the beginning of the 20th century, Russia was ahead in so many areas: music, art, film, architecture, theatre, even technology. Did you know the International Court of Justice in the Hague was Tsar Nicholas II's idea? And look at the Ballets Russes in Paris – that was so ahead of its time. So my family still feel very emotional about this."

Smagin-Melloni insists that the ball can fill in where politics fails. "If you know Russia, you will know about these inferiority complexes that Russians have. But go to any orchestra in the world and you will see 50 per cent of the staff are Russian-speaking. Go to a ballet and you will see 50 per cent of the dancers are Russian. Here they can show what they are." And in uncertain times, it is worth keeping these channels open.

"During the Cold War there was always a cultural exchange between the Soviets and the West," she insists. "In the hottest days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Bolshoi Ballet was playing to standing ovations in New York. We are all human beings. Everyone loves their children and their parents, and wants food on the table and a roof over their heads. So we need to keep these connections. And where else could you have such positive connections as here?" ■