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Getting hot under the collar over Russia's fur coats

Luke Harding
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[The Guardian](#)

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Dancers from the Moscow State Academic Theatre of Dance. Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

It sounds like the world's most hopeless crusade, a bit like trying to persuade the British to stop talking about the weather or the Spanish to give up their siestas. But a campaign is being launched in Moscow next week to persuade Russian women to surrender their fur coats. Vita, a Russian animal rights organisation, is calling on fashion-conscious devushkas to hand over their furs and do their bit for Russian wildlife. The furs will be collected in the capital's Pushkin Square. They will either be destroyed or - it is rumoured - buried in a pet cemetery.

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There is only one problem: Russia's savage winter. Although January was one of the warmest on record, snow has now arrived. Over the weekend, Moscow's streets were full of women wrapped up in mink, squirrel, and unfortunate beaver - hardly surprising given that it was a bone-chilling -18C.

"When it's below -10C my fur is the only thing that keeps me warm," says Alla Molchavnova, a 37-year-old perfume designer. "I have one with a mink collar. It's perfect, because you can wear it on the metro without getting too hot."

Anatoly Pavlovich, a 58-year-old security guard, says that his wife wears a fur coat because "they're fashionable", but that Russian men don't wear fur: he is sporting a sheepskin hat.

Russian fashionistas say the campaign is doomed - not just because fur is supremely practical in sub-zero climes, but also because it is a status symbol. Russia's new rich wouldn't be seen dead without a fur coat, typically costing at least \$50,000. "Fur is prestigious. We will continue to promote it," says Alyona Doletskaya, editor-in-chief of Russian Vogue. "If we had a climate like Greece it would be very different. But we don't."

In the US, Peta - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals - has recruited a string of naked celebrities to wage war on fur. Vita, however, has so far only managed to rustle up a children's poet, Grigory Gladkov. He was reported last week to be writing an anti-fur poem, which reads, poignantly: "They greet us with a smile and we put them on our heads."

Despite the lack of obvious public support, Vita's president, Irina Novozhilova, is defiant. "Killing animals

is cruel. Even Arctic explorers these days wear man-made fibres," she says. "We don't expect our campaign to work quickly. But that doesn't mean we should do nothing."

History suggests she shouldn't be too optimistic: since the 18th century Russia has been the world's biggest fur exporter, and everyone from Tsarist ladies to Soviet-era grannies have worn fur.

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