

## TRICKY MINISKIRTS: RUSSIAN GENDER THROUGH THE EYES OF POLISH CULTURAL FILTERS<sup>1</sup>

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This article investigates cases of the misinterpretation of Russian models of male-female relationships caused by so-called “cultural filters” in Poland. Stereotypes and ethnocentrism interfere with cognitive process and impede comprehension which, in turn sometimes causes misunderstandings with serious consequences.

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Artykuł poświęcony jest polskiej interpretacji rosyjskich modeli relacji damsko-męskich. Oprócz samego faktu odmienności modelu przyjętego w Polsce, u podstaw problemu złej interpretacji leżą mechanizmy etnocentrycznego spojrzenia na „obcego”, stereotypy oraz tzw. filtry kulturowe, co czasem doprowadza do nieporozumień o poważnych konsekwencjach.

**Key words:** Poland, Russia, intercultural communication, stereotypes, male-female relationship

Are Russians good wives and husbands? Why does a Russian girl who had a love affair in an Egyptian holiday resort decide to give up her life at home, apply to study in Warsaw, and come to live in Poland? Is it certain that a Russian husband will become an alcoholic after fifteen years? How can we be sure that our Russian daughter-in-law did not marry our son for money and Polish citizenship? In “serious” media and academic discourse there is usually no place for discussions on such insignificant issues. However, in the life of many people in Poland, it is these questions that are very important because they concern their everyday life, when chance acquaintances end in marriage and starting a family with a Russian. At the same time, it is very difficult to find the right answers to these questions as often our knowledge about what governs such subtle issues as love in the world of Russians is limited to an analogy with the Polish model as well as to stereotypes that we are not fully aware of.

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I have the impression that, despite the abundance of stereotypical judgements, the whole sphere of Russian love: masculinity and femininity, canons of beauty and handsomeness, as well as 'attractiveness', is one big unknown for Poles. This topic very seldom becomes the subject of publications that are more serious than typical entertainment articles appearing on the internet, such as "How to tame a Russian girl"<sup>2</sup> or "Get yourself a wife from Russia"<sup>3</sup>, as well as opinions expressed on different Polish-Russian internet forums and blogs<sup>4</sup>. As far as Polish journalism is concerned, it is worth mentioning Bartosz Janiszewski's article "Żona wschodnia" [An Eastern Wife] (Janiszewski 2011). It is based on interviews conducted with a few clients from two Russian marriage bureaus and that is why they are a valuable source of information about how Poles see the difference between Polish women and "women from the East". It is not often that this complex problem is discussed in Polish academic circles and if it is, it is usually based on historical material (Kowalska-Glikman 1977, Niewiara 2006) or on art, e.g. films (Kalinowska 2011, Kalinowska-Blackwood 2013, Stachówna 2011, Ostrowska and Wyżyński 2006), or on literature (Trześniowski 2010). In contemporary Polish fiction, I have only been able to find three novels that touch upon this subject (Strelnikoff 2008, Nurowska 2009, Wiśniewski and Vovnenko 2012). However, quite a lot of misunderstanding is caused by TV talk-shows aimed at a public in search of sensation<sup>5</sup> as well series (e.g. Oxana Krajewska from *Na Wspólnej* [On Wspólna Street], Vadim from *Samo życie* [The Ups and Downs of Life], Yura from *Plebania* [The Presbytery], Natasha from *M jak Miłość* [L like Love]), in which relationships between Poles and "people from the East", commonly understood as being from Russia and Ukraine, are touched upon.

The result of a lack of serious, objective reflections on the subject of gender in Russia is twofold. The first consequence is a large number of stereotypes and the second is ethnocentric, superficial and very general reflections. The very phenomenon of a stereotype is of course based on ethnocentrism. It is a general mechanism connected first with a lack of knowledge on a given subject and secondly, with the interpretation of existing features and forms of behaviour in accordance with the values of one's own culture. In ethnology and cultural anthropology, "ethnocentrism" is an accepted term, primarily meaning the negative results of perceiving the world from the point of view of one's own nationality and of everything that is connected with it. Intercultural

<sup>2</sup> <http://facet.wp.pl/gid,10931304,img,10931309,kat,84554,galeriazdjecie.html>, access 23.07.2015.

<sup>3</sup> <http://facet.wp.pl/kat,70996,wid,12211948,wiadomosc.html>, access 23.07.2015.

<sup>4</sup> [www.forum.opolshe.ru](http://www.forum.opolshe.ru), [rosjapl.info/forum](http://rosjapl.info/forum); portals with groups of Russian-Polish topics: Odnoklassniki.ru, [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru), [facebook.com](http://facebook.com), and other social networks; separate topics on: [f.kafeteria.pl](http://f.kafeteria.pl), [forum.gazeta.pl](http://forum.gazeta.pl); blogs, for example: [kij.blog.pl](http://kij.blog.pl).

<sup>5</sup> Episode from *Rozmowy w toku* [Conversations in Full Swing], No. 1922, broadcast on 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2011 at 15.55 entitled "Dla Ukrainek 'Poljaki' to najlepsze chłopaki" [Polish Lads for Ukrainian Girls]. Although the girls on the talk-show are Ukrainian, the image they create of "women from the East" also has an influence on how Russian women are perceived.

psychologists use a different term, that of “cultural filters”. This is actually the same phenomenon, with intercultural psychology perceiving it as a natural feature of cognitive activity. Paweł Boski has reformulated the notion of ethnocentrism and describes it as “a cognitive filter anchored in the values and practices of one’s own culture, through which the cultural practices of people treated as foreign and different are seen, interpreted and assessed” (Boski 2009, 494). A cultural filter is made up of knowledge about some historical facts but a lack of knowledge about others, an interpretation of certain events, phenomena and forms of behaviour, as well as associations and reactions that are accepted in a given circle. We can be sure that in reflecting on a foreign cultural phenomenon without being appropriately prepared for it, even after a detailed ‘case study’, we will come to partially mistaken conclusions only because all the facts are assessed through the prism of our own culture.

Examples of such ethnocentric reflections on this topic come from four texts written by Polish correspondents in Moscow and a fiction writer. Piotr Skwieciński’s article *Emocje na szpilkach* [Emotions on High-heels] (Skwieciński 2011), an article by Waław Radziwinowicz *Jakie są... Rosjanki* [What Russian Girls Are Like] (Radziwinowicz 2003) and a chapter entitled “Kobieta” [A woman] in Krystyna Kurczab-Redlich’s book *Hitting the Head on the Kremlin Wall* [Głową o mur Kremla] (Kurczab-Redlich 2007, 13–28) are all about women’s lifestyle in Russia and touch upon its different aspects: the way they dress, their relations with men, and sexuality. Although these texts are quite ironic, their authors come to some generalizing conclusions about the tendencies and reflect on the reasons for such a state of affairs. A novel by Maria Nurowska *Rosyjski kochanek* [The Russian Lover] (Nurowska 2009) is about a love affair between a Polish woman and a Russian man. The author also describes the relations between Russian lovers.

In what way then do Polish cultural filters deform the image of Russian sexuality? Firstly, this occurs due to already established stereotypes<sup>6</sup>. The stereotype of a Russian woman is well-developed but is actually internally contradictory and in fact it is probably possible to talk about the existence of a few stereotypes of Russian women. The first one is of a young, attractive, feminine woman, capable of making every man’s dream come true, both emotional and sexual. The second one is a girl who is not too fussy and has sex for the sheer pleasure of it, which stems from her “wild”, elemental eastern nature. The third stereotype of a Russian woman is also very active sexually, but for totally different reasons – in this way she earns money to improve her lifestyle, at the

<sup>6</sup> Over the last five years I have been conducting research on Polish stereotypes of Russians, both male and female, Polish-Russian relationships, and typical married Russian couples. The research has been done in Poland’s urban environment. The material consists of interviews that I recorded with married Polish-Russian couples, views expressed on the above-mentioned internet forums, press reportages and in literary fiction. It was also the subject of my PhD dissertation *Problemy w polsko-rosyjskim komunikowaniu się na przykładzie mieszanych związków małżeńskich i nieformalnych* [Problems in Polish-Russian intercultural communication – evidence from cross marriages and informal partnerships] (Wojtas 2014).

same time making the most of naive men. The fourth one is usually older, untidy, badly dressed, with cheap make-up, tired due to the manual work she does (“a fat woman on a tractor”), a woman who is uneducated and has no manners. Her life is centred around a husband who is a feckless alcoholic or she is mainly concerned with earning a living. She has Communist views, is backward and in her heart is still living in the Soviet Union. The internet discussions on Russian women are very emotional, which confirms the view about deep-rooted stereotypes on the one hand and the stereotypes having a lack of cohesion on the other. People writing on the internet often stress that they have no contact with Russian women but this does not seem to prevent them from expressing their own opinions on the matter. The above-mentioned article by Janiszewski provides an interesting example of making use of Polish stereotypes of Russian women, as well as the auto-stereotype of a Ukrainian girl as a person totally submissive to her man.

It is much more difficult, however, to formulate Polish stereotypes concerning Russian men. I would even risk stating that such a stereotype has not been formed in the consciousness of Poles. Rather, it is only possible to speak about certain tendencies in judgements that have the features of a stereotype. Russian men drink a lot and because of that very often look a mess. At the same time, in Russian men there is something rapacious, male, wild (this view appears only in opinions expressed by women). The general stereotype of a Russian has an influence on how Russian men are perceived. An example of this are the views expressed in the context of emotional relationships with Russian men about their desire to conquer, their “imperialistic” nature, general lack of manners, stupidity (about the general Russian stereotype see, among others, de Lazari 2006; de Lazari and Rongińska 2006; *Etnolingwistyka* 2002; Adelgejm *et al.* 2000).

It is possible to observe the existence of two stereotypical views concerning Polish-Russian relationships but I seriously doubt the actual existence of a stereotype concerning a relationship between a Polish woman and a Russian man. It seems that the entire stereotype of Polish-Russian romances is based solely on what people imagine the relations to be between a Polish man and a Russian woman. Being in a relationship with a Russian woman is either heaven on earth due to the fact that all her features are positive, or is a venture that is anything but sensible and safe because a Russian girl will never allow anybody to take advantage of her. Quite the opposite, she will be the one to take advantage of others, and “being married to a Russian girl is a contract”<sup>7</sup>. In such a relationship, the man is only interested in being together, whereas the woman is interested in money (Wojtas 2014, 99–155).

This type of stereotypical thinking does not exhaust the ethnocentric way of understanding reality. Attempts at looking more deeply into the issues concerning Russian sexuality by people not having any objective knowledge of Russia and of the social processes taking place there, have been naturally distorted by cultural filters

<sup>7</sup> Bimbalek, 24.10.2010, a statement on the forum: [http://f.kafeteria.pl/temat/fi/czym-sie-roznia-rosjanki-od-polek-p\\_4634283](http://f.kafeteria.pl/temat/fi/czym-sie-roznia-rosjanki-od-polek-p_4634283), access 23.07.2015.

(Boski 2009; Matsumoto and Juang 2007). What is foreign to the Polish authors (the way the Russian women dress and use make-up, how they make contact with men, and the accepted model of a relationship), even if it is not always received negatively, needs to be explained and “justified” from the point of view of one’s own culture. The unusual features and forms of behaviour of Russian women are explained in various ways (the way of governing the country, rapid demoralization, even corruption), but brought together, they refer to an exceptional situation which has an influence on society as a whole.

#### “A BATTLE FOR A MAN”

I will here touch upon the most common ideas about Russian gender presented in four above-mentioned texts. Most often, all the noted differences between Polish and Russian models are explained by

“the fierce battle for so-called unusual goods. For a man... The specific model of demonstrating their own sexuality by young Russian women is at least partially the effect of this situation”,

as Skwieciński (2011) formulated. “In this country, a girl starts getting ready to fight for a man in her early childhood”, writes Radziwinowicz. The source of this situation is looked for through reference to one of the biggest Russian social problems – alcoholism – as well as to Poland’s painful historical experience, i.e. the destructive influence of the USSR. This influence is perceived in a number of ways: the USSR’s military operations resulted in a decrease in the number of men, the Communist party brought about the country’s drinking problem and instilled in women the inability to take decisions which, in turn, has resulted in them wanting to hide behind men’s backs, and the fall of the USSR was too great a trauma for the Russian man, bringing about his final breakdown.

To what extent are those and other similar explanations justified? The authors of all the quoted texts support their views by referring to their own experiences in Moscow or in other large cities where a lack of men physically and emotionally capable of starting a family is not visible at all. The problem appears primarily in the provinces and in rural areas (e.g. in the rural area of Omsk region in 2005–2012 the proportion of men was 48%, Kutuzova 2014, 111). Moreover, the statistical asymmetry of the sexes begins to be visible in people over fifty years of age, so this cannot directly influence the behaviour of young people (Lajkam 2010)<sup>8</sup>. Alcoholism and a decrease in population are indeed

<sup>8</sup> According to official Russian statistical data, in 2010 the ration of men to women in Russia in different age groups was as follows: 20–29 year-olds – 50% women, 50% men; 30–39 year-olds – 51% women, 49% men; 40–49 year-olds – 52% women, 48% men; 50–59 year-olds – 55% women, 45% men; 60–69 year-olds – 61% women, 39% men; 70–79 year-olds – 68% women, 32% men; over 80 years old – 77% women, 23% men (Lajkam 2010).

facts and certainly may have a negative influence on romantic forms of behaviour. The view, however, that the masculinity of the contemporary Russian male depends on the existence of the USSR is not true. According to Skwieciński:

“the fall of Communism and the crisis of the 1990s had a destructive influence (...) primarily on men who, together with the disintegration of the Soviet structures that had lasted for so many decades and during which they used to have their own reasonably stable place, found themselves deprived of dignity. (...) Soviet society was to a certain degree patriarchal; the cornerstone of a patriarchal society is a man and this cornerstone suddenly fell apart (Skwieciński 2011, 77).

Russian men, however, experienced the defeat of their patriarchal position not in the 1990s but between 1920s and 1940s. This crisis lasted for a long time and was connected with the purposeful actions of the Soviet authorities and such changes could not take place within only a few years. Russia had always been a patriarchal country, the USSR as well. However, from 1918, when the first Soviet code of law concerning marriage was introduced, the “patriarch” was no longer the man of the family, but the state. For decades, both the law and state propaganda were directed towards separating men from their basic role. A man’s role as father and educator was aggressively taken over by the Party, the role of feeding the family and organising its life was taken over by social institutions, whereas any signs of involvement in family life were seen as being bourgeois and egoistic. The Soviet man was once and for all removed from the sphere of traditional male responsibility. Instead, he was given a more abstract type of responsibility – for one’s “fatherland”, “for peace in the world”, etc. The 1990s, on the other hand, became as if the beginning of a renaissance of Russian masculinity as the features of a “real man” again became important and a topic of research (Attwood 1990; Borenstein 2000; Kay 2006; Ašvin (Ashwin) 2006; Kon 2009; Černova 2008; Hasbulatova 2008, Busygina-Wojtas 2015).

#### EXUBERANT SEXUALITY OF RUSSIANS

Various aspects of sexual behaviour are interwoven into the stereotype of a Russian woman. On forums not connected with any Polish-Russian subject, the often heard slogan “a Russian girl” immediately evokes such reactions as “Look for her on the motorway”<sup>9</sup>, “You can call her ‘Tanya’<sup>10</sup> although that is not always her name”<sup>11</sup>, comments on sexual abilities, as well as utterances seemingly in the name of that abstract

<sup>9</sup> Gzegzulka, 03.04.2015, a statement on the forum: <http://joemonster.org/art/22916>, access 23.07.2015.

<sup>10</sup> In the original there is a play on words here; in Polish, the Russian female name is spelt ‘Tania’, which also signifies ‘cheap’ [translator’s note].

<sup>11</sup> Zigzaur, 06.06.2005, a statement on the forum: [http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,50,24837077,24872734,Rosjanki\\_tylko\\_dla\\_Rosjan.html?s=0&wv.x=1&v=2](http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,50,24837077,24872734,Rosjanki_tylko_dla_Rosjan.html?s=0&wv.x=1&v=2), access 23.07.2015.

Russian girl in pseudo-Russian encouraging men to have sex. On the other hand, Russian women are also often described as being “voluptuous”, “hot”, or “are yum, yum”. According to this way of thinking, having a relationship with a Russian girl is always stereotypically perceived in categories of sexuality.

The sexual associations connected with Russia are a very interesting issue and require a much more extensive discussion than the limits of this article permit. In part, they are based on experiences from the 1990s, when many Russian speaking women (from former Soviet countries) worked in Poland as prostitutes. The result of this is the exaggeration of sexual themes in reflections on what is Russian. “Cultural and legal limitations concerning sex in the public sphere are not present to the same degree as in the West”, writes Skwieciński (2011, 78). Kurczab-Redlich makes a statement, that “an increased libido” has been a specific feature of Russian women “for ages”, which is connected with eating cabbage: “guests from abroad know about it, natives know about it”. In her opinion, that is the reason of a social encouragement for sexual freedom and prostitution (Kurczab-Redlich 2007, 27–28).

Meanwhile, sex, both in the public and private sphere, is even today a form of taboo subject in Russia. From when the first anti-abortion bill was passed in the 1930s, the political decision was that there was no sex. Soviet society was very puritanical. Peasant values became the values of Soviet society as a whole. Due to a limited working class in Tsarist Russia, it was the peasants who became the elite of the USSR. Sexuality as such, as well as its indirect images in art or in clothing, was prohibited and stigmatised. Michaił Veller wrote about this in a humorous way in his stories “Laokoon” and “Mongolian Film” (Veller 2004; Veller 2010). Although the situation changed somewhat after the fall of the USSR, this could be mainly observed in larger towns and in the world of teenagers (Rivkin-Fish 2007). I saw billboards in the London Underground promoting sexual activity for handicapped people, sculptures representing copulating couples as well as human genitals in the streets of Prague, huge photos of naked men and women staring you in the face at bus stops in Berlin, but never have I seen anything like that in either in Moscow or St Petersburg. The incident in January 2010, when a several-minute pornographic film appeared on electronic billboard in Moscow as a result of a joke played by a hacker during the night, caused such a sensation that even after eighteen months it was still the subject of discussion and the culprit was sentenced to prison<sup>12</sup>. In April, 2015 a video recording on YouTube with young girls ‘twerking’ caused a scandal that even involved the Investigative Committee<sup>13</sup>. In Russia, for example, no official Gay Pride parades have ever taken place. We can even speak about the opposite happening. Since 2013, any propaganda dealing with homosexuality

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=438883&tid=76613>, access 23.07.2015.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/winnie-the-pooh-twerking-dance-routine-sparks-criminal-investigation-at-russian-dance-school-10177265.html>, access 23.07.2015.



among minors, i.e. manifesting homosexuality or expressing approval for it publicly has been strictly forbidden in Russia<sup>14</sup>. Attempts to introduce sexual education in schools are met with protests on the part of the children's parents and condemnation from the Ministry of Education. This taboo subject has been compensated for by romanticism. The subject of love appearing in Soviet literary works was saturated with emotionality, even sopppiness (Usmanova 2004). The second consequence is the smaller role played by associations relating to sex and contacts between men and women. In the USSR, it was the "comrade" (*tovarišeskij*) model, a friendly relationship as between male and female colleagues that was promoted, and is still the norm today.

#### BREAKING THE RULES

"A specific Russian phenomenon – the dictatorship of emotion", as it was defined by Skwieciński, is another problematic issue. In many opinions expressed on Polish-Russian forums, as well as in interviews conducted by me with Russians living in Poland, there continues to appear the notion of "Polish artificiality". On the other hand, my Polish interviewees, who often travel to Russia, speak about Russians' "exaggerated effusiveness", about them not always knowing how to behave in company. We are confronted here with different models of communication (Busygina 2007). The Russian canon of communicational forms of behaviour assumes much larger freedom in improvisation, allows for expressing quite a wide range of feelings, even in formal contacts, whereas behaviour seen as "artificial" is condemned and immediately disqualifies the speaker. In linguistic works, a specific type of conversation that is very popular in Russia – and is also highly valued – is described as "a conversation between kindred spirits"<sup>15</sup> (*razgovor po dušam*) (Dement'ev 2010). What is characteristic of this type of conversation is its personal, emotional tone, with a large degree of openness on the part of the speakers who are often talking together *po dušam* as a result of having simply met by chance, e.g. on an overnight train. Being emotionally involved in one's job, in one's relationship with another person, in different forms of entertainment, in entertaining at home, etc. ("treating [everything] with emotion", *podhodit' s dušoj*) is a core Russian value (Prohorov and Sternin 2007). On the other hand, behaving according to certain norms and respecting other people's autonomy is of great importance in Poland. That is why Russian spontaneity is very often seen by Poles as a sign of bad manners or as importunity. Radziwinowicz describes a situation when he and a colleague were entertained by a friend in Russia. Their host, an elderly lady, prepared a "real feast"

<sup>14</sup> Federal Law No. 135, 30.06.2013.

<sup>15</sup> Although the literal translation of the Russian phrase would be "conversation of souls", it has to be remembered that the Russian notion of 'soul' and that of the English 'soul' is characterised by more differences than similarities [translator's note].



at breakfast time, and Radziwinowicz “tried to explain to her that she shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble”. According to Russian principles of communication, he made a big mistake because he started questioning their host’s need to become so emotionally involved in her guests, in her feeling that she had to look after them, according to the rules of Russian hospitality. Finally, turning the situation into a joke, she said: “You don’t know how nice it is to make breakfast for a man. I haven’t done it for so many years”, which was understood by them as the custom of “fighting for a man”. Several times Nurowska mentions the spontaneous behaviour of her main character, a Russian scientist called Alexander, which disgusted his Polish lover (Nurowska 2004).

Russian coquetry is based on various aspects of emotional involvement. In Polish tradition both men and women flirt to the same degree. This has been shown in a historical analysis of the relevant vocabulary as well as by different studies conducted by historians of Polish culture (Kuchnowicz 1983; Zadrożyńska 2004). Russian women often see the courting conducted by Poles as an example of egocentrism and duplicity. In Russia, coquetry is the domain of women, whereas a man’s task is to show care, constancy in his feelings, and attention. The Russian word *uhażivat’*, expressing this task, does not have its equivalent in Polish (Wojtas 2014, 196–205). A man should show his involvement in order to prove that the woman is worth paying attention to. The more “superficial” the courting, the lower the grade achieved by any potential relationship, if not in the eyes of his partner, then definitely in the eyes of those watching. This model does not make up the concept of “fighting for a man”, so attempts at giving it an ethnocentric label evokes consternation:

“Just imagine a girl in a mini, in heels that practically reach the sky, I smile discretely and... nothing. There’s no reaction whatsoever. As if she didn’t see me. Another one – the same. (...) I felt they weren’t seeing me at all”, complained a Polish interviewee to Skwieciński. “Paradoxically, despite the mini fashion, the strong position of sex in mass culture, and the fact that it is no more difficult in Russia to have sex than in Poland, there is still the conviction there that men should at least appear to fight for their women”, comments the author of the article (Skwieciński 2011, 78).

The Russian woman, on the other hand, shows her emotional involvement in her relationship with a man through what may be very briefly called “offering herself to him”. this can take on various forms: that of care, submission, and creating a patriarchal relationship, forever being close to an alcoholic husband, looking after him in such a manner that he is brought down to the level of a child (such behaviour is the result of Soviet experiments on the family); finally, subordinating one’s life so as to be together with a man. It is worth recalling here the wives of Dekabrists, who followed their husbands who had been sent to Siberia, or of the wives of Soviet – also present-day Russian ones – graduates of military academies who, once they graduated, gave up their own occupations and went to some god-forsaken garrisons thousands of kilometres away from home. Promising to go to the end of the world is also a certain type of coquetry. Another Polish interviewee told Skwieciński the following story:

“On one of our first dates, when I asked her when she’d be in Warsaw, she answered that she could come immediately, whenever I wanted (...)’, said a married Moscow Pole after his romantic experiences with a Russian girl. “Then she said she wanted to have two children with me... Of course, this was a bit too much for me” (Skwieciński 2011, 78).

### “RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF MAKE-UP”

Polish authors often write about the provocative clothing and make-up of Russian women.

“Above the high-heels there are... legs. Legs, much more often, than in Poland, naked up to the level of mini- or supermini-skirt (...). The icing on the cake is a low neckline” (Skwieciński 2011, 77).

“[A Russian woman] excessively looks after her appearance, has an excessive make-up, everywhere (especially at work) shocks people with her dress too low-cut and too short” (Kurczab-Redlich 2007: 24).

If we compare the Russian norms concerning clothing and make-up to the same Polish canons, we are immediately struck by two basic differences: in the former there is less reticence in the choice of colours in reference to both clothes and make-up, as well as to emphasizing their female shapes (this concerns young Russian women). A love for bright colours is characteristic of oriental and Byzantine cultures which have had a big influence on Russian culture. For centuries, it has been the Russian Orthodox Church that has led the way in the use of colours. The custom of colour contrasts (pale skin but red cheeks) were already observed in 17<sup>th</sup>-century sources (Puškarëva 1997), so it seems that we cannot speak about the “Russian school of make-up”<sup>16</sup> created in the specific conditions of Soviet times.

Norms and expectations concerning how women dress touch upon the category of “femininity”. Expressing one’s femininity in Russia is now seen differently than in Poland. The reasons for this phenomenon are quite complex and the fight for a man does not exhaust the subject.

The main reason for the existence of a different femininity cult in Russia is the smaller presence of the Western feminist movement. What is generally defined as “Russian feminism” has completely different roots and is also expressed differently (Ajvazova 1998). The pre-revolution patriarchal model assumed that a woman’s basic task was to see to all the everyday needs of her husband, whereas he was fully responsible for her. Against this “Orthodox-Byzantine” background the Russian feminist movements of 1910–1920 appeared. The basic assumption was freeing women from the home in favour of work for the good of society, as well as making it possible for

<sup>16</sup> Draker, 12.10.2009, a statement on the forum: <http://rosjanie.pl/forum/viewtopic.php?p=134879>, access 23.07.2015.

them to express their feelings freely. The view promoted by Alexandra Kollontaj, the leading Russian suffragette of the time, was very romantic and did not promote total independence from men. Conversely, the Polish suffragettes of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were proud of the fact that they did not want to be in a male-female relationship, expressing this through their unattractive choice of clothes (Muszyńska-Hoffmanowa 1970). Their Russian equivalents, though, and the early Soviet “feminists” wanted women to be able to choose their partners at any time during their lives, no matter the existing arrangement (Kollontaj 1918, 1919). The institution of marriage was being destroyed, at the same time liberating women’s energy and time for the benefit of work outside the home. Women were accorded three roles; that of mother, wife and a “builder of Communism”. As a wife, she was to work towards a good relationship with her husband and also take care of her appearance so he would find her attractive. As a mother, she was responsible for the home and the children, whereas her duty as a “builder of Communism” was to work conscientiously outside the home. Equality on every level was introduced in the USSR in the 1920s and from then women have done many male jobs, including hard manual labour. That is why it was not necessary for Soviet women to dress in trousers to prove that they would cope in a man’s world (Jancar-Webster 1978; Warshofsky-Lapidus 1978; Heitlinger 1979; Bridge 1987; Buckley 1992; Engel 1999; Chatterjee 2002). During the last few years in Russia, the influence of “Western feminism” has been visible, but it is the above described mechanisms that lie behind it.

The second reason can be found in traditional Russian ways of behaviour that were not changed much by Soviet family policy. The Catholic model assumed that woman had more freedom and independence and this also extended to taking decisions. This could have been connected with the cult of the Virgin Mary or in the different way life was organised in medieval urban areas (Barański 1975).

The basic difference between the present-day Polish and Russian patriarchal model is that in Russia women’s emancipation was forced from above from 1918 on a patriarchal society. In Poland, grass-roots feminist movement gradually changed the model and prepared the society for adopting the new ideas. It seems that Russian women have never really perceived themselves as being a separate entity from men: first they were their masters and guardians, then, in Soviet times, somebody to look after, sometimes even a “necessary evil” in the figure of a husband not able to care of himself. That is why the conviction that they had to “be attractive to men” has never lost its value and even today is on the list of a Russian woman’s social commitments.

As my research on Polish-Russian couples shows (Wojtas 2014), clothes and appearance are seen by Russian women as an important element of their femininity, which should be shown and stressed at any time (“We love high heels, clothes that emphasise the body (...). We love being women!” – an example given by Skwieciński). Meanwhile, my Polish female respondents do not pay as much attention to it.

## CONCLUSION

As can be seen, cultural filters may be a serious barrier in correctly interpreting forms of behaviour connected with one's emotional and sexual life. In my research, I have often come across Russian women who have initially been enthralled by the elegance and good manners of Polish men but, after a short time, they became bitterly disappointed because their charming Pole actually turned out to be quite indifferent. Similarly, I meet many Poles who, thinking they would have a quick romance with a Russian girl with no strings attached, are deeply disappointed with the demands they are confronted with. On the blog of a Polish man, I read the following:

"At 2 p.m. I'm meeting a married woman (she's a Russian living in Warsaw) whom I first met eighteen months ago. We bumped into each other quite by chance in a shopping centre two weeks ago (...). There was nothing between us, we'll see what the future will bring. Seeing a married woman accepted my invitation to have coffee together – we don't really know each other – it would appear that not everything is O.K. in her marriage. Maybe she'll want to talk about it..."<sup>17</sup>

The writer of the blog is definitely creating a cause and effect link on the basis of information processed through his cultural filter, ascribing his Russian acquaintance with the desire for a romance, at the same time being prepared to betray her husband on the basis of the accepted invitation. Of course, we do not know the real intentions of his acquaintance, but knowing something about the mechanisms governing the emotional life of Russians permit the supposition that, for her, this man's attitude may be a rather unpleasant surprise. The invitation could of course have been accepted because of her desire for such a romantic adventure or simply through politeness, or because she wanted to make more friends in a foreign city. If the starting point was indeed politeness on the part of this woman, the whole situation could become quite grotesque, which of course is not rare when we take into consideration emotional relationships between Russians and Poles.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://nonkonformicjusz.blog.pl/2009/12/10/moj-napiety-grafik-randkowy>, access 23.07.2015.

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