

# NEW KIDS FROM THE BLOC





Those who grew up during the fall of the Soviet Union are now the kings of Moscow's underground arts scene. And the fashion codes of this youth uprising – strict tailoring, radical slogans and deconstructed Eighties tracksuits – are leading a style revolution, says Harriet Quick  
Photographs by Gosha Rubchinskiy. Styling by Joe McKenna





The distinctive blue of the Russian Airborne Troops is entering modern fashion vernacular. On the backs of a new generation, Prada's leather jacket signals a changing of the guard

Leather jacket, £2,495.  
Wrap skirt, £1,075. Both Prada. Tights, *throughout*, £16, Falke. Vintage Sancho boots, *throughout*, courtesy of Carlo Manzi. Hair: Malcolm Edwards. Make-up: Lauren Parsons. Production: Katia Barer at Photofactory.ru and Total Management. Models: Natalia Kruglova, Milena Litvinovskaya, Aleksandr Nemirov and Kirill Sokolovsky







**Clean slate:**  
designer Demna  
Gvasalia leads  
fashion into  
the future via  
his childhood  
in post-Soviet  
Georgia. This  
season, all eyes  
are on Balenciaga's  
reworked  
**military jacket**  
Leather jacket, £2,125.  
Spandex skirt, £485.  
Both Balenciaga.  
Ribbed poloneck, £320,  
Michael Kors Collection







Junya Watanabe's slogan dress points us in a new direction – in this instance to Klintzy, former hub of Russia's textile industry  
Cotton sweatshirt dress, £375, Junya Watanabe





# G

osha Rubchinskiy was hanging out on Moscow's alternative scene in the Noughties, and techno music, skateboard kids, film and photography were all part of the picture. He got his first collection off the ground with the help of the owners of the Solyanka nightclub and it was shown in a stadium, modelled by runners. Named *Empire of Evil*, after Ronald Reagan's reference to Russia during the Cold War, it was snapped up.

Nine years on, Rubchinskiy, who trained at art and design colleges in the Russian capital, is atop a thriving brand, invested in and produced by *Comme des Garçons* since 2012 (he met *Comme des Garçons* president Adrian Joffe at a Moscow gathering), and one that speaks to kids the world over with its palimpsest layers of subversive graphics, references to Russian art history, football, skateboarding and the Nineties post-Soviet era; but crucially, synced with what's happening now. It is one part of his bigger work that reaches out to film (five shorts), photography, books (nine) and events.

"I'm 32. The early Nineties were a special time for Russia, after the Soviet Union collapsed," Rubchinskiy says from his Moscow HQ, where he employs 10 people. "There was a raw energy and people were going crazy for new art, films, nightlife, magazines... I was too young to go clubbing, but I remember older kids at school coming back in the morning with red eyes. We only had one store that sold streetwear. Others wore tracksuit tops, T-shirts, stuff influenced by the ravers they'd seen in *The Face* and *i-D*. Now I am older, I'm trying to translate that energy and find the equivalent for now." For his Adidas Football x Gosha Rubchinskiy collection, he took fashion off-grid and staged a show featuring local football fans and boys in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea.

In 2017, fashion's weathervane is pointed at a generation of creatives from Russia and other former Soviet republics (including Georgia, Kazakhstan and the Ukraine) who are mining their own collective memories and the multilayered history

and culture of the former USSR. This isn't exclusive to the area; nostalgia for one's own youth is a designer's rite of passage worldwide. It might be Christopher Kane's memory of his older sisters dressing up in Versace-esque dresses in suburban Glasgow, or the footprint of Eighties hip-hop and skate cultures in Virgil Abloh's label, Off-White.

From a Western perspective (we are inured to entrepreneurial culture, liberal democratic values and the sheer abundance of fashion), the stories, visceral imagery and disruptive ethos of harking back to Soviet-era Russia feel familiar yet strange. (As a young girl, to me life behind the Iron Curtain looked heroic, purposeful. I was so obsessed with Eastern-bloc athletes that my mother bought me a Siberian hamster – I called it Misha, after the mascot for the 1980 Olympic Games.) By the late Nineties, the image of Russia was of leather-trouser- and fox-fur-clad glamazons. Now we have Ukrainian embroidered peasant dresses, 21st-century tsarinas in velvet couture gowns by Ulyana Sergeenko, and – most poignantly – haute streetwear and an Eighties/Nineties rewind through a post-Soviet eye. Some might call it a "realism" revolution.

There is rich reference to be drawn from the Gorbachev years (1985 to 1989). In the *glasnost* period, as the USSR opened up, East/West style transference reached a new peak. Mugler shot campaigns in Moscow (now Georgian-born David Koma is its creative director). Magazines, American rock, European new-wave music, Western designer denim and sportswear, and *Dallas* videos were available – at a price – through the black market. "People bought fashion and prized items through sailors and diplomats, or made friends with someone from the West," says Djurdja Bartlett, a reader in histories and cultures of fashion at the London College of Fashion. Her book *Fashion East: The Spectre that Haunted Socialism* charts the relationship the East had with fashion, from sanctioned socialist fashion to the production of smart, luxurious collections (put on show but never into production) used to symbolise a progressive economy. > 133



Above: girls on a park bench, Old Arbat Street, Moscow, 1987.



Above right: Muscovite clubgoers in Hermitage Garden, 1993.

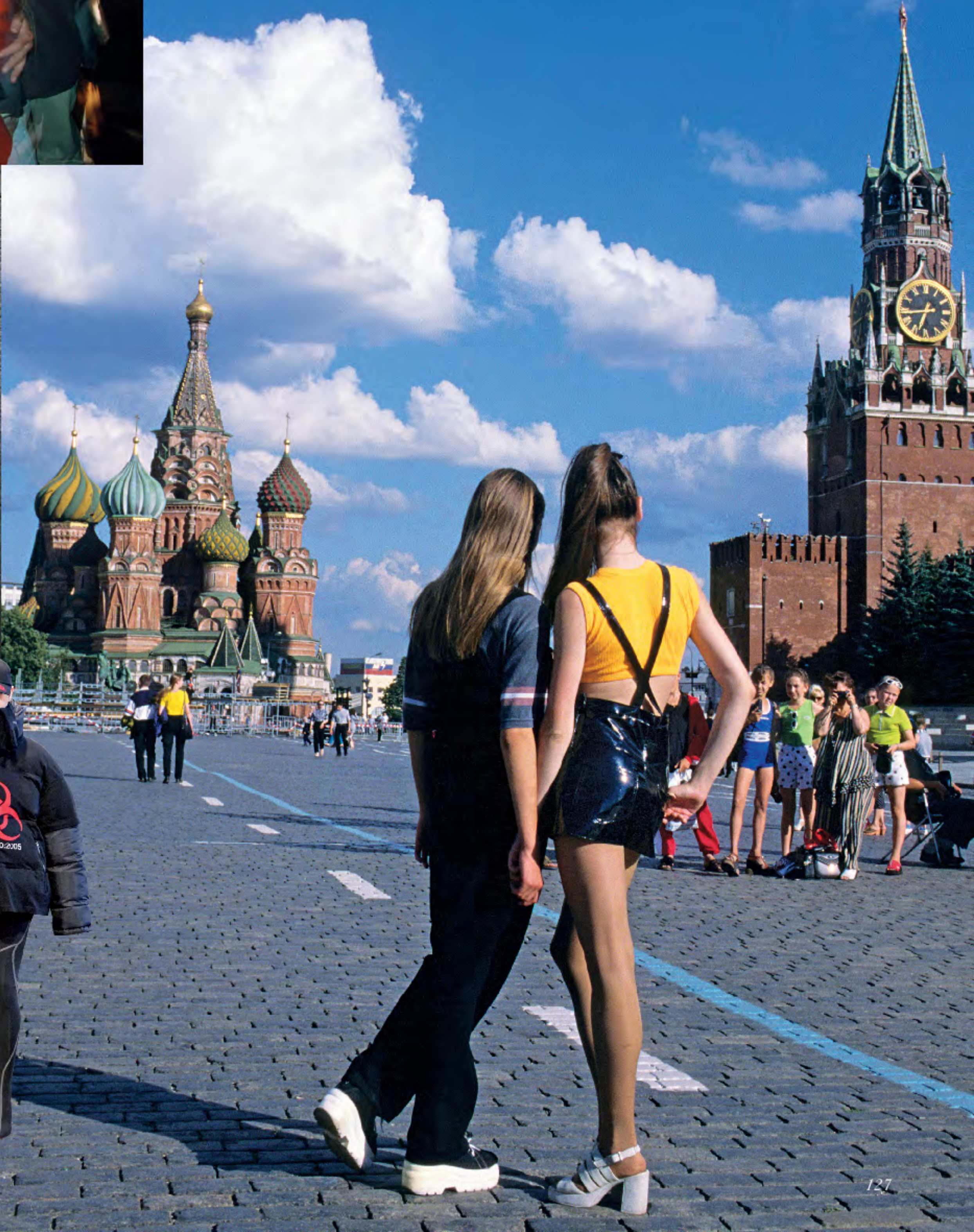
Right: a page from Russian underground magazine *Om*, November 2000



ALBERT & VERZON/AGENCE VU; THE CALVERT JOURNAL; GUEORGII PINCHASSOV; IGOR MOUKHIN; JASON LLOYD-EVANS; PETER TURNER/GETTY; WOLFGANG MAHLER/GETTY







Left: an 18-year-old girl named Katya stands next to a police car on a street near Red Square, June 1991. Above: portrait of a woman on a Moscow street, August 1991. Far right: two girls pose in Red Square – with St Basil's Cathedral and the Spasskaya Tower in the background – July 1998



VETEMENTS A/W '16









Polish up your denim; perfectly pressed retro acid washes return, thanks to Véronique Leroy

*Opposite:* denim jacket, from £620. Cotton shirt, from £450. Denim skirt, from £390. All Véronique Leroy. Ribbed poloneck, £320. Michael Kors Collection. Vintage sunglasses, £160. House of Liza, at Farfetch.com

Knife-sharp Eighties office tailoring is now at the cutting edge. This is fashion for “real people, normal people going about their daily jobs,” says photographer and designer Gosha Rubchinskiy

*This page:* jacket, Joseph. Shirt, Gosha Rubchinskiy. Trousers, Neil Barrett



A deconstructed  
zip-up tracksuit  
– the patriotic  
sporting uniform  
of bygone national  
heroes – is now  
the symbol of  
a subversive  
youth uprising  
Track top with leather  
detail, from £730,  
Versace. Spandex skirt,  
£485, Balenciaga.  
Poloneck, as before





Neatly does it...  
the pulled-  
together look is  
less track and field,  
more Nineties  
rave in field  
Track jacket, Joseph







Street life: top row, from left, two women in Moscow, August 1991; girls at a cat sale in Leningrad, 1987 (the city reverted to its former name, Saint Petersburg, in 1991). Above: inside Moscow's Titanic club, 1995. Left: an image from Gosha Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration Book* (Junsuke Yamasaki, 2012). Far right: woman on a Moscow street, August 1991



ALBERT & VERZON/AGENCE VU; GUEORGUI PINKHASSOV; IGOR MOUKHIN; JASON LLOYD-EVANS



“The overriding Western impression of Soviet fashion was that it was uniform and grey. But for many decades, it had been a hyper-mediated society. There were numerous journals and fashion magazines, but they were state controlled and did not sell advertising. They sold their own project and that was socialism.” In the late Eighties the country opened up. “Russians started to travel and get more information about the West, and freedom to express themselves in the arts and fashion,” says Bartlett.

In the Eighties and Nineties, buying from the black market, sewing and knitting your own and remaking thrift was the only way to be stylish. Daria Shapovalova, the 29-year-old founder of Mercedes-Benz Kiev Fashion Days, grew up in Siberia. “I remember the grey cities and the white snow. Everything was scarce. My mother and grandmother were very stylish and used to make journeys to Lviv in the Ukraine, where there was a great trade in black-market thrift because it was closer to Europe,” says Shapovalova, who has helped place Ukrainian designers on the map at Kiev Fashion Days and through her sales agency, More Dash, in Paris.

Until the Russian economy crumbled in 1998, there was hope, a spirit of euphoria and a gargantuan appetite for the new. With the opening of clubs such as LSDance, Ermitazh and Titanic in Moscow and a vibrant underground culture, there was plenty of opportunity to express yourself.

Style nirvana for Gen Z is “real” street and skatewear that warps and plays with semiotics, shapes and symbols. It is leagues apart from generic casualwear, and its subversive attitude suits Silicon Valley moguls as much as cool polymath twenty-somethings. Thus exaggerated hoodies, giant padded jackets and artfully reassembled denim jeans by Vetements (brainchild of Georgian brothers Demna and Guram Gvasalia and their Russian stylist Lotta Volkova) have spawned a thriving copycat business of their own. Meanwhile, Volkova’s blunt fringe has triggered a trend for haircuts that are choirboy and hard as hell in one go. In this fashion moment, anything haughtiestreet (in retail parlance) with indecipherable Cyrillic graphics (plastered on Junya Watanabe’s rebel punks) and paradoxical undertones is catnip. Street and sports “cool” is not the only story either. Witness our appetite for the heavily embroidered linen dresses by Ukrainian designers including Vita Kin and Yuliya Magdych, which sell for £1,000-plus. Both reinterpret the country’s ethnic *vysyvanka* smocks with luxury finesse.

“I would not queue for a hoodie, but I would to get hold of a Sisters of Mercy ticket, and I would queue for love,” remarks Demna, bemused at the label’s cult

following. Like Rubchinskiy, he is fascinated by normal people going about their daily jobs – girls and boys on the fringes of culture and in the suburbs, as opposed to the gilded life of the *jeunesse dorée*. Not since David Sims and Corinne Day brought the look of real suburban youth (all matted hair, chewed fingernails, curtainless windows and naked lightbulbs) into the landscape of style in the mid-Nineties has fashion been so enamoured with “real”. Changing the focus from youth, in Vetements’ a/w ’17 show there were Milanese-lady upcycled fur coats, ladies-who-lunch suits, and tourist-class transformer trousers and vests.

The thirtysomething generation has witnessed a lot of change, and that makes their vision unique. The Gvasalias escaped Georgia in 1991, as bloody conflict erupted in Tbilisi. “I have had to adapt since the age of 10, when civil war broke out,” says Demna. “There was bombing every night, and the family sheltered in the cellar. My father was fighting in the army and there was a stash of Kalashnikovs hidden in the house. We spent

“I have had to adapt since I was 10, when civil war broke out,” says Vetements’ Demna Gvasalia

two weeks in the mountains, trying to cross the border on horses with my grandmother. It was something you would see in a movie. We took only the photo album with us – we had to run. That experience influenced me as a person, and it underlined certain values about what is important in life. It’s life, it’s people – not material signs.”

The auteurs of this style movement are brilliantly savvy and gutsy. Rubchinskiy, the Gvasalias and Volkova (all friends who met in Paris) have helped put the spotlight on this vast region. Lesser-known labels – including Atelier Kikala by Lado Bokuchava and LTFR (both from Tbilisi), Russia’s Walk of Shame, ZH Saken from Kazakhstan, Ukrainian designer Paskal and London-based Estonian Roberta Einer – share an uncompromising vision, from the ingenious, rigorous cuts and the expression of empowered sexuality (think of that terrifying Eighties dominatrix at Balenciaga’s show) to the catwalk scenography and the brooding, athletic beauties who model the clothes.

“I was in Moscow, Lotta in Vladivostok, Demna was in Georgia. Different places, but the energy after the Soviet collapse was the same,” says Rubchinskiy. “It was dangerous

and fascinating. Now, when we create, we want to share what we remember and do something strong and perhaps we miss that time.” The fetishism for objects that grew out of scarcity and rarity, as Bartlett says, is very tangible in the operations and collections of Vetements. When an item is produced in a run it is not repeated.

The reality of being a creative in a former Soviet republic is far from straightforward, however. Heavy import taxes on European fabrics, production issues and convoluted business laws make it hellishly complicated, and the domestic market is limited. The average wage is \$600 a month. But the talent, zeal and relative youth is remarkable. “The problem is finding quality fabric suppliers and pattern-cutters,” says Sofia Tchkonka, founder of Tbilisi’s Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week. Here, you can still find shops selling secondhand garb by the kilogram. In the flea market, situated on the Dry Bridge overshadowed by glossy international hotels and new developments, young Georgians and tourists truffle for Soviet-era *objets* and vintage sportswear.

For designers who grew up in post-Soviet states, the culture of sportsmanship resonates beyond politics. During Kiev Fashion Days, staged in early February in temperatures of -14C, one of the most moving shows was presented by Lilia Litkovskaya, 36, who set up her label in 2009. She comes from a long line of tailors and was able to invent and cut complex patterns aged just 16.

Litkovskaya chose a Soviet-era physical-education university as a venue. The building was striking, with its wall of fame for Ukrainian Olympians, murals and blue-washed basketball court. Out came heroic women dressed in leather shirts, based on renaissance fencing apparel, delicate hand-embroidered ivory dresses, swishy skirts inspired by choirboy vestments, and hologram-effect low-slung trousers – each piece original, superbly polished, desirable.

“It is a beautiful building and a working institution and it is like many across Ukraine and Russia – it gives me goosebumps. In our global world, we only have love and what is exemplified by sport, the force of the human spirit,” says Litkovskaya. “These things can’t be sold on Instagram or controlled by the laws of the market. I want to show my vision and I want to show everyone the excellence in our country in post-Soviet times.”

As guns are fired in eastern Ukraine in a newly heated up conflict with Russia, and as refugees flee the battlezone, Litkovskaya’s brilliance is piercing. And she’s right. This new beauty, strength, vision and courage will prevail long after those knock-off hoodies and Bangladeshi-made faux-Ukrainian smocks hit another thrift bin. ■



Translation:  
"Russian  
Renaissance".  
Well, what else  
would Gosha  
Rubchinskiy's  
cult T-shirt say?  
White cotton  
T-shirt, £45, Gosha  
Rubchinskiy, at  
Dover Street Market

РУССКИЙ РЕНЕССАНС









The Soviet-era talent for transforming thrift into something special still reigns supreme with Vetements' spliced-up approach. The signature piece: a reworked asymmetric dress. Gathered dress, £1,350, Vetements, at [Net-a-Porter.com](http://Net-a-Porter.com)



Classical ballet dancer Kirill Sokolovsky spans the old world and the new. What he wears while studying at the prestigious Vaganova Ballet Academy in Saint Petersburg? Vetements' second-skin T-shirt

T-shirt, Vetements.  
With thanks to the Savoy Hotel, Moscow.  
*For stockists, all pages, see Vogue Information*

