

Michelle Obama Bringing Glamor To Moscow

By Catrina Stewart, Associated Press Writer

MOSCOW, July 4 (AP) – Michelle Obama brings her superstar glamor to Moscow this weekend as she accompanies her husband on his summit with the Russian president.

But the American first lady, who has wowed publics in the U.S. and Europe with her easy elegance and charm, will perhaps face a bigger challenge in winning over a Russian public that has scant respect for women who grab the limelight from their powerful husbands.

In a country where a presidential candidate once quipped he'd sooner pack his wife off to a convent than allow her to dabble in politics, Russia still has trouble with the concept of an empowered woman behind the throne.



"The institution of first lady in Russia is still quite young," said Alyona Doletskaya, editor of Russian Vogue and doyenne of the Moscow fashion scene. "So there are no huge expectations on the part of Russian public."

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's wife Svetlana is pious and discreet and met her husband while she was a schoolgirl. She supports charity and the arts, but has assumed no independent voice on issues facing the country. She dresses conservatively, lacking the edgy fashion sense that has attracted a nationwide following for Michelle Obama.

Russia has known one iconic first lady in modern times: Raisa Gorbachev, wife of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who was much loved around the world for breaking with tradition by appearing regularly in public with her husband, embracing high fashion and firing off wisecracks during official foreign trips.

But she earned little affection for her boldness in Russia, where she was seen as strong-willed and ambitious.

Far from shrugging off the old constraints when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Boris Yeltsin's wife Naina assumed a lower profile behind her husband, achieving popularity by declaring indifference to politics and saying she would sooner see Yeltsin retire.

As for Vladimir Putin's wife, Lyudmilla, she only occasionally appeared in the company of her husband — fueling widespread reports the two were estranged.

In the United States, first ladies are accustomed to coming under the media spotlight — and Michelle Obama seems to revel in it.

On a recent trip to Paris, she impressed the fashion-conscious French with her chic designer outfits standing side-by-side with the country's former supermodel First Lady Carla Bruni. In Britain, she famously breached palace protocol by putting her arm around Queen Elizabeth II.

And she does not hesitate to speak her mind on a range of important social issues, such as health and education.

Many Russians, traditionally conservative, look askance at such assertiveness.

"A wife should be sitting at home, creating comfort and cooking food," said Zoya Getmanova, a female pensioner living in Moscow. "She could express her opinions over the dinner table, but she shouldn't meddle in politics."

Perhaps in deference to Russia's uneasiness about a political wife with popular support of her own, U.S. White House officials have suggested Michelle Obama will avoid the limelight during the visit.

Svetlana Medvedeva, meanwhile, has flitted between the shadows and the spotlight. She is liked by younger Russians, who follow her appearances at celebrity bashes and her frequent outings — hand in hand — with her husband.

She has acquired a reputation as a tenacious networker who helped restart her husband's career in the mid 1990s, and is said to play an influential role in his career behind the scenes. Trained as an economist, she gave up her own job to look after the couple's only child, born in 1996.

Despite all that, Svetlana barely breaks the mold crafted by so many first ladies in Russia before her.

She largely confines her public observations to carefully rehearsed speeches; she provides sympathetic interviewers with bland comments on womanhood. She dresses conservatively in tailored, pastel-colored outfits.

Michelle Obama's fashion sense attracts comparisons with Jacqueline Kennedy, and there is a Web site entirely dedicated to what she wears.

Vogue's Doletskaya is cagey about passing judgment on Svetlana's style, saying simply that she is "very representative of Russian femininity."

But when questioned about the U.S. first lady, Doletskaya becomes lively. She describes Michelle's style as "very fresh," as someone who mixes boldly "but in a very refined way."

There is a recognition that Svetlana has a difficult role to play — managing the expectations of both a conservative older generation and ambitious, career-minded younger women who would like her to step up.

"It's not easy" to be a first lady, said Oksana Fyodorova, Miss Universe 2002. "But I think she (Svetlana) will succeed. And then we'll see who is better — Michelle or our Svetlana."

Associated Press Writer Natalya Vasilyeva contributed to this report. (END/2009)