



Ksenia Sobchak, before a meeting with Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, Moscow, in March 2018.

KSENIA SOBCHAK

AND THE VISIBILITY OF FEMALE POLITICIANS IN THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC SPHERE

by **Liudmila Voronova & Emil Edenborg**

“Enough, guys, really, enough! Indeed, [we’re] fed up with all of you!” With this motivation for running in the 2018 presidential election in Russia, Ksenia Sobchak announced her participation in the race. The 36-year-old candidate, in her first campaign video addressing potential voters, talked about the disenchantment with the political old-timers, and she encouraged her audience to articulate their protest by voting for her, the candidate “against everyone”.¹

This entrance of a young, active, female media celebrity was perceived by some as a refreshing and promising shake-up of the male (and old) political establishment. To be sure, this was not the first time a female candidate competed in the presidential election – Irina Khakamada ran as a liberal candidate in 2004, receiving 3.9% of the votes. However, far from all critics of the current regime were enthusiastic about Sobchak’s candidacy. Like Khakamada before her, Sobchak was accused of being a “faux opposition candidate”, if not handpicked then at least tolerated by the Kremlin as an alibi to provide the image of a fair and democratic election, while more “viable” candidates like Aleksey Navalny had been

barred from participating.² These allegations notwithstanding, the participation of Sobchak, who is well-known and with a large fanbase, in the 2018 elections could be seen not so much as a roadway to a political shift, but as a potential challenge to the existing gender hierarchy and “machismo” in the Russian political landscape.

THE DAUGHTER OF Anatoly Sobchak, one of the most renowned liberal politicians of the perestroika era, and Lyudmila Narusova, a member of the Federation Council of Russia, Ksenia Sobchak made her own career as a television star and “it-girl” in the 2000s. While her image as a light-weight celebrity and her photo shoots for several men’s magazines were clearly in line with post-Soviet gendered societal roles, in 2011 she repositioned herself as a spokesperson for the young, urban, relatively well-off, and educated generation that is dissatisfied with the current political system. In the words of Masha Gessen, Sobchak seemed to develop a political conscience overnight.³ She participated in the Bolotnaya protests of 2011–2012 and became a host at the Kremlin-critical television channel *Dozhd*. As a candidate in 2018, she ran on a liberal, free-market program, spoke out about political prisoners and human rights abuses in Chechnya, posi-

tioned herself as gender-aware albeit with an ambivalent relation to the word “feminism”,⁴ supported same-sex marriage,⁵ and was the only candidate who openly stated that Crimea should be considered Ukrainian territory, despite the risks of damaging her electoral ratings.⁶

RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT in a notoriously male-dominated sphere could hardly be considered an easy business. According to the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report, Russia is ranked 121st (out of 144) when it comes to the political empowerment of women.⁷ Female deputies constitute only 15.8% percent of the lower chamber of the State Duma and only 17.1% of its upper chamber.⁸ Prime-minister Dmitry Medvedev’s 2018 cabinet includes only two female ministers (out of 21) and two female deputy prime ministers (out of 10).⁹ Russian scholars have pointed to the structural problems in Russian politics, where political power remains as one of the most impermeable “ceilings” hindering women from gaining influence.¹⁰ This is explained by the concentration of resources in the hands of men,¹¹ as well as the strategies of political appointments and recruitments from the spheres traditionally occupied by men.¹² In the gendered Russian politics, women often appear as highly sexualized accessories demonstrating male politicians’ virility and heterosexuality, or as symbols of motherhood, fertility, and “traditional” values. In the few cases where female politicians rise to prominent and visible positions, their political niche is often confined to traditionally female-coded issues such as family and children; Duma representative Elena Mizulina, one of the main advocates of the 2013 ban on “propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations targeting children”, is one example. At the same time, both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have several times suggested that there should be more women in politics, and that the highest position in the state might also soon be occupied by a woman.¹³ In 2017, the National Strategy for Women for 2017–2022 was adopted with the aims of implementing the principle of equal rights and freedoms for men and women and of creating equal opportunities in accordance with national and international legislation.¹⁴

Another problem that women with political ambitions face is the way the public sphere is infused by gender stereotypes. The “conservative turn”¹⁵ has coincided with the “politicization of gender in the last decade of Putin’s Russia”.¹⁶ As shown by Sperling, the use of overtly gendered rhetoric and actions is an important legitimization strategy in Russian politics for both pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin actors, ranging from male politicians behaving according to machoist ideals, to sexualization and objectification of women, to accusations of homosexuality (and pedophilia) directed towards political opponents.¹⁷ Riabov and Riabova, Boreinstein, and others have argued that Vladimir Putin is seen as embodying the remasculinization of the Russian nation and of Russian manhood, which is perceived as having

been weakened and “feminized” by the loss of superpower status, humiliating losses in the war in Afghanistan and the first war in Chechnya, NATO and EU expansion into its historical sphere of influence, the economic and social chaos of the 1990s, and the poor health and rampant alcoholism among Russian men¹⁸.

After announcing her presidential campaign in October 2017, Sobchak, perhaps unsurprisingly, was represented in mainstream Russian media as an “unruly woman”¹⁹ who was transgressing the existing patriarchal norms and rules, and she was explicitly reminded by male journalists and TV anchors of the “real” and “traditional” role a woman is supposed to play. Having been on the “black lists” of national TV channels for several years²⁰ likely due to her oppositional political profile and professional activities at *Dozhd*, Sobchak started to appear in very different types of programs. Andrey Malakhov, TV anchor, celebrity in the world of yellow journalism, and Sobchak’s old competitor for recognition – in 2012, only Malakhov was a more popular TV anchor than Sobchak²¹ – invited Sobchak to his new evening show on the national channel *Rossiya-1*.²² The program – due to Sobchak being late – started with Malakhov interviewing Sobchak’s mother, Lyudmila Narusova, herself a political and public figure, asking her to speak about Ksenia’s childhood and, particularly, her fear of dragonflies and mice. This absence of Sobchak herself – despite the particularly informative occasion of Sobchak’s presidential run – could be seen as symbolic, as if Sobchak was not an independent person, but just the daughter of her influential parents and who had gotten of control. When Sobchak finally appeared in the studio, Malakhov chose a patronizing style and regularly reminded her of her role as a

mother, asking her if she is “not sorry for running away from home early in the morning and coming back late in the evening”. Similarly, Khakamada who had previously appeared on TV in her role as a powerful politician, economist, and entrepreneur, recently has primarily been raising interest in her role as the mother of a child with special needs, and in February 2018 she

appeared on the evening show *Pust’ govoryat* to talk about her daughter’s private life.²³

IT IS NEITHER NEW nor unique to Russia that female politicians are treated in a different way than their male counterparts by the media. Previous research from all over the world shows that female politicians’ gender is often irrelevantly spotlighted, their private lives and appearance become the main focus of the stories, and they are shown as unnatural and incompetent political actors.²⁴ In the Russian context, this has often been attributed to the “post-socialist patriarchy renaissance”²⁵ and the unpreparedness of journalists to adequately address the significance of women’s enhanced representation in the political sphere. Russian journalists themselves – at least those working for the quality press – recognize the problem of gender inequality in

“VLADIMIR PUTIN IS SEEN AS EMBODYING THE REMASCULINIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN NATION AND OF RUSSIAN MANHOOD.”

politics and in media alike. Yet, on an everyday basis facing the challenges of the market and, often, political pressure, they prioritize other issues and give up on the idea of “educating” their readers on gender issues. Moreover, they do not feel that they have the power to change the gender hierarchies in society so they choose to think of their role as reflecting rather than as constructing the political “reality”.²⁶

BEFORE SHE APPEARED on the mainstream channels, Sobchak was invited to an interview by the popular video-blogger Yury Dud'.²⁷ Despite the alternative – in relation to mainstream – character of Dud's program (provocatively titled *vDud'* referring to either colloquial “palm off”, “deceive”, or obscene “rude sexual intercourse”), where the guests are allowed to smoke, drink, and use obscene words in the studio, Dud's show does not provide an alternative to traditional gender stereotypes. Dud' chose a mockingly paternalistic style, constantly implying that Sobchak belongs to the political elite and is a politician close to Kremlin's “family” rather than an oppositionist. He also asked her questions about the distribution of responsibilities in her family. Sobchak confronted Dud' saying that he is a sexist because he had never interviewed women before, to which he replied that the reason for this gender imbalance is that he only invites “interesting people” to his studio.

The questioning of Sobchak by male TV anchors continued when yet another TV celebrity, Ivan Urgant, the host of his own late-night show on the national *Perviy* channel, made two parodies – the first on Sobchak's first video announcing her candidacy for the presidency,²⁸ and the second on her interview with Dud'.²⁹ In the latter parody presented on his infotainment talkshow, Urgant in a blond wig and with a mannered voice replied to the montage of Dud's questions as if Sobchak replied to all questions out of place, and only talked about the kitchen and clothes, never taking up any political issues. Taking into account that the TV audience is not always overlapping with the Internet audience, one can assume that some of the *Vecherniy Urgant* show viewers believed that this was what the *vDud'* show with Sobchak had been about. Interestingly, in the interview with Dud' Sobchak criticized Urgant for making her an object of jokes and by doing this putting her into the same category of mocked politicians such as Gennady Zyuganov (leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation since 1993) and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia since 1992), whom she does not want to be associated with. This example proved once again that in the discourses of the Russian media – not only state-controlled, but even new and “alternative” media – women who dare to leave



Ksenia Sobchak participating in an interview with the popular video-blogger Yury Dud'. In the background, above the TV set, the text says: “Mom told me not to do it!”.



The TV celebrity Ivan Urgant's parody of Sobchak's participation in Dud's show.

the “cozy” realm of kitchen-kids-private relations-clothes are given a place of objects, but not subjects of humor.³⁰ Male media celebrities – explicitly like Malakhov, implicitly like Pozner,³¹ rudely like Zhirinovskiy, or jokingly like Urgant – remind women of their sex and their role.

ONE OF THE MOST discussed episodes of the pre-election race was Sobchak's emotional reaction at the debates broadcast on national channel *Rossiia-1*.³² Constantly interrupted and offended by one of the most scandalous and at the same time ever-lasting politicians, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – who said, with reference to Sobchak, that “we should not bring in ‘market girls’ (*bazarnykh devok*),³³ from the street” – she splashed a glass of water over him, saying that she would use “the same methods as him”.³⁴ Clips of the episode were circulated across the media, sometimes describing the incident with reference to “a woman's wrath” or other words suggesting that Sobchak was overly emotional. Zhirinovskiy's press spokesman afterwards called Sobchak a “fake candidate” who was disturbing the work of the “real” competitors of President Putin.³⁵ Emotional, “hysterical”, “unruly”, and strange reactions by male politicians are seldom discussed in relation to

gender, but “hysterical women” is a common stereotype that is often used for discrediting powerful women.

During the time of Sobchak’s campaign, several media productions focused on women’s “unruliness” were broadcast. While the timing was most likely coincidental, these programs nonetheless could have contributed to a gender framing of Sobchak’s media representation. The *Perviy* channel broadcast a TV show called *Babij bunt* [Women’s riot] (only run in November–December 2017), and *Rossiya-1* showed the 16-episode series *Krovavaya barynya* [Bloody lady] (February 2018). *Babij bunt* suggested a “women’s view on the news” and – despite a catchy trailer showing revolutionary women – appeared to be a “classical” talk show with five more-or-less scandalous female celebrity anchors emotionally discussing rumors. In the very first episode of the show, among the invited guests was, once again, Sobchak’s mother Narusova, and, although Sobchak’s campaign was not the focus of the discussion, this appeared as a slight association of Sobchak with both the world of rumors and stars and with unruliness, riots, and scandals. *Krovavaya barynya* was presented as a “historical drama” and was devoted to one of the criminal personas of Russian history, the 18th century aristocrat Daria Saltykova who shocked both contemporaries and their descendants by her indeed bloody crimes; she tortured and killed more than a hundred of her serfs. Since the times of Ekaterina the Second, Saltykova has been one of the frightening symbols of brutality that can explode when women get power – yet Ekaterina herself has rather symbolized the success of a woman’s rule and the prosperity of the country. In this sense, the broadcasting of the series at the same time as there appeared a female candidate for the highest political post in the country seemed to pose a question about the potential consequences of Sobchak’s gaining power.

RECEIVING IN THE END only 1.68% of the votes in total – though among Russian expatriates in London and Amsterdam she received around a quarter of the votes – Sobchak’s campaign would appear to have had little political impact with President Putin being re-elected with 76.69% support. So how can her candidacy be understood in terms of gender representations and the role of women in Russian politics? It is yet unclear if the Party of Changes, which Sobchak co-founded shortly before the 2018 election, addresses the changes in the gender hierarchy specifically. And, apart from being “against everyone”, it is difficult to say who Sobchak herself is: an “unruly woman” who consciously transgresses boundaries and norms, or a neo-liberal post-feminist who believes in the power of glamour and the ideal body and who actually does want people to submit to the norms prescribed by the media, for which she is often criticized. As an already well-known figure and the only woman in the race, Sobchak and her campaign received much media attention, not least in oppositional media and international media. However, as feminist scholars long have

pointed out, public visibility of an underrepresented group is in itself not an indication of positive change; it is the quality rather than the quantity of the visibility that matters.³⁶ In fact, as Wendy Brown argues³⁷, when visibility means stigmatizing representations that reinforce stereotypes and dominant norms, it is not necessarily preferable to invisibility. Importantly, our analysis shows that such highly gendered representations of Sobchak were prevalent not only in state-controlled media channels, but also across the media landscape, including in alternative media targeting younger, urban, middle-class voters who were the main target groups of Sobchak’s campaign. Moreover, different media platforms – television, press, blogs, and social media – interacted and drew on each other, circulating the same gendered tropes in their reporting about Sobchak. This suggests that the representation of female politicians in Russian media cannot be attributed to the specific political regime, but is rather

a result of a wider gender regime that preceded and most likely will succeed the current Russian political leadership. This gender regime, moreover, is not something specific for the Russian context, and with the current developments in, for example, Hungary, the US, and Poland, it becomes obvious that – as once nailed by gender and media scholar Liesbet van Zoonen, and quite likely applicable to the situation 15 years later – “while everything else that’s solid melts in the air, traditional gender relations fly high and dry”.³⁸ ❌

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