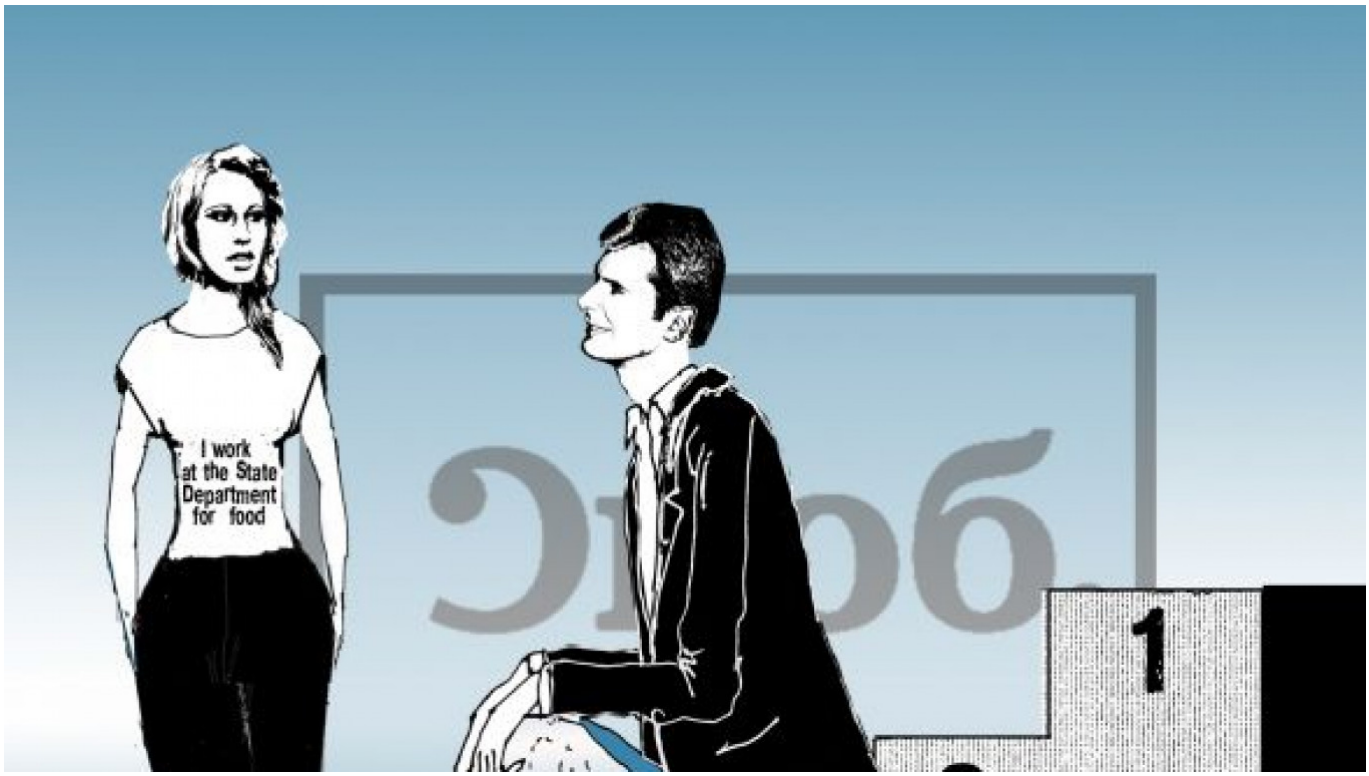
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

March 01, 2012



This week, it girl and media personality Ksenia Sobchak reopened her talk show on politics after it was shelved by MTV Russia. The show, now called "GosDep 2," or "State Department 2," came out on the Snob.ru website, which belongs to presidential hopeful Mikhail Prokhorov.

She later returned the favor by grilling Prokhorov on what he thinks of gay men and why he has an entourage of useless friends.

MTV Russia pulled Sobchak's original "GosDep" show after just one lively episode, which invited opposition figures such as Sergei Udaltsov and Yevgenia Chirikova as well as pro-Kremlin activists. Sobchak said the ban came after she invited Alexei Navalny for a later show, although MTV claimed that its viewers simply were not interested in politics.

Prokhorov stepped in, offering to air the talk show on his Snob.ru website.

The new show looked similar, with guests ranged along white sofas. Sobchak wore a T-shirt with the slogan "I work in the State Department for food," coordinated with breeches

and riding boots.

Navalny came on as a guest for the episode called "144 hours till the elections." Unfortunately, out of the bland MTV context the talk show lost a lot of its shock value. It was heavy on men in dark suits and only verbal scuffles. Navalny and liberal politician Boris Nemtsov both impatiently told opponents to "shut up!" in the heat of debate. Nemtsov got the biggest cheer for stating the obvious: "You can't call any elections legitimate if people know in advance who will win."

Sobchak also invited Prokhorov onto her show on Dozhd online television, called "Sobchak Live," where she is interviewing the candidates one by one. Prokhorov looked awkward as usual, perched on a low chair with his jeans riding up, and certainly didn't give the impression that they are best of friends.

Sobchak tried to draw him out on his personal life and his bachelor state. "What do you think about gay men?" she hinted. Prokhorov said he laughed off rumors he is gay, before breaking into a fit of coughing. He said some of his friends are gay and that "I'm a free person, I hang out with people who I find pleasant" — actually a brave position.

She tried to narrow down Prokhorov's romantic interests, asking if there were any women "in the Russian Federation" whom he likes and who have a chance of becoming his "first lady."

"Undoubtedly there are some in the Russian Federation," he answered sphinx-like. This week, the Levada polling center placed him fourth in a survey on Russian sex symbols, below pop star Filipp Kirkorov, Vladimir Putin and stripper Tarzan, a pretty odd list.

Sobchak said she had been to his parties in Courchevel and suggested that he is surrounded by a noisy crowd of hangers-on, something he denied, insisting that they are "bright, talented guys."

"I've seen your friends. You are the most clever and thoughtful among them," she said. "I'm not sure that's a great compliment."

Among Prokhorov's friends are television host Anton Krasovsky, oligarch Oleg Baibakov and former GQ editor Nikolai Uskov, who now heads Prokhorov's media group, Sobchak said. Prokhorov himself called North Caucasus envoy Alexander Khloponin his best friend.

In the only revealing anecdote, Prokhorov described how his mother once tried to force him to eat some lumpy cottage cheese by not letting him leave the table until he had finished.

"The first day I sat for 12 hours," he said, showing a steely will for a child. The next day he managed five more hours, before his parents backed down. That was the only time he got punished, he said.

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