The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Female Leaders Manage Mentalities

By Alexander Bratersky

March 06, 2013



Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko, above, told television host Vladimir Pozner in October that she had never experienced any gender-related issues in politics, but she said the country's mentality still works against women.

Yelena Andreyeva wears two hats.

Most of the time, she is the head of Bastion, one of the country's leading private security agencies, which she founded in 1992.

But a few days a week, Andreyeva, a textile engineer by training, teaches students at the Moscow University of Design and Technology.

She said that being a female chief executive of a company that employs several thousand men armed to the teeth in addition to being a university professor has helped her better understand Russian businesswomen.

"In the security business, I am willing to take risks, although I've had plenty of ups and

downs," Andreyeva said. "In my teaching job, I am always on a middle level and not looking for any adventures because everything is comfortable enough, though there is less motivation." ⊠⊠

Her attitude exemplifies the fact that some Russian women, despite being ambitious, prefer to be more conservative in their job goals and are not necessarily willing to take risks.⊠⊠

Women in the workplace here are often more vulnerable and are laid off faster than men in times of crisis. Women are also paid 20 to 30 percent less for the same job, labor market experts say.

"You have to have an ambition and be willing to take a risk," Andreyeva said.⊠⊠⊠⊠

Although many women started to work in small and medium-sized businesses after the collapse of the Soviet Union, few have achieved top positions in business, especially at companies like Andreyeva's Bastion.

"As a rule, women who don't see themselves in any particular position accept the first job offer they get after college and have low self-esteem or a total lack of trust in themselves. They see some nonexistent boundaries established by male society," said Yulia Klebanova, the head of business development at Intel Russia.⊠⊠

Although the technology sector is still heavily dominated by men, Klebanova reached high levels and has worked in senior roles at NTV television and Lucent Technologies, now part of Alcatel-Lucent.⊠⊠

Klebanova said her background in electrical engineering along with an MBA from the U.S. helped her reach her current status.

"An engineering approach is focused on resolving issues and achieving success while having limited resources," she said.⊠⊠

Female Leaders a Novelty⊠⊠

Still, Klebanova is a rare example of a female senior company executive here. The number of women in top management in leading Russian companies is still small. ⊠⊠

According to recent estimates by PricewaterhouseCoopers, women account for only 7 percent of the total number of board members of the 50 top publicly traded Russian companies. ⊠⊠

Research by personnel agency Unity that was cited by Vedomosti last year named metal giant RusAl, nickel producer Norilsk Nickel and the country's biggest lender, Sberbank, among companies that lead in having women as senior managers. ⊠⊠

The situation is different in Europe, according to estimates by Hay Group, an international consulting company dealing with personnel and management.

Research conducted in 12 European countries over the past two years showed that the number of women on company boards is increasing. ⊠⊠

While men still account for 83 percent of all of top managers, in 2012, only in Italy was the number of men in senior management above 90 percent, according to Hay's research.

"In Russia, the term 'leader' is associated with a man. A woman who achieves a top-level position must be better than a man, since the career ladder is a constant struggle," said Valery Martsinovich, Hay Group general director for eastern Europe.

Martsinovich also said that after spending two to three years on maternity leave, many women in Russia find it difficult to compete with men.

"It is hard for them to chase a man whose career has been developing," he said.

While maternity leave in Russia can last up to three years, many professional women in big cities are going back to work after spending only a few months at home, leaving their baby with a family member or a nanny.

Work-Life Balance

Klebanova spent several months on maternity leave after her son was born, but she takes care of him now despite the burdens of working.

"My life has shown that a child doesn't feel upset that a mother is leaving for work early and returning home late, but he feels upset when a mother is still working after coming home from work," Klebanova said, adding that she has developed the ability to abstain from business after working hours.

During the Soviet era, the government-sponsored welfare state encouraged new mothers to go back to work early because their children could be put into nursery schools from the age of 2 months.

"The system was created to help women," Andreyeva said. "Despite ideological pressure, there was a heavy involvement of women in public and working life."

Women in Politics

While local companies have various approaches to support their female employees, a few attempts have been made to introduce legal quotas for women on the lists of political parties to encourage female political participation.

But those efforts have not been supported by the majority of lawmakers. Ella Pamfilova, who served as the Cabinet minister responsible for social issues in the 1990s and is now a public activist, said that in the current political situation, imposing quotas for woman would be a bad idea.

"Since our political system is rather defective, it would look like an artificially induced birth," Pamfilova said.

In 2000, she became the first women in Russian history to run for president. She was defeated by Vladimir Putin and received only 1 percent of the vote.

Pamfilova said she is inspired by a “collective portrait” of powerful women, including former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Soviet diplomat Alexandra Kollontai.

Like Klebanova, Pamfilova thinks her background in technical engineering and physics helped her gain respect. She was admired by such political heavyweights as Yegor Gaidar and Viktor Chernomyrdin, both former bosses.

“You have to have character and brains. Those people don’t buy any girly stuff,” said Pamfilova, who is known for her strong spirit despite her trademark tender voice.

While Pamfilova is against introducing quotas for women, she believes that female sports and show business celebrities who hold seats in various legislatures will eventually be replaced by women who enter politics or government service after successful business careers.

“They have the most chances. That new generation of women will speak their minds,” Pamfilova said.

The Russian government currently includes two women, Health Minister Veronika Skvortsova and Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets.

Both were named among the 50 most influential women of 2012 in rankings compiled by RIA-Novosti, Interfax and Ekho Moskvy.

Eastern Mentality

The rankings were topped by Valentina Matviyenko, the speaker of the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament. According to the Constitution, she is second in the order of presidential succession behind the prime minister.

Matviyenko told television host Vladimir Pozner in October that she had never experienced any gender-related issues in politics, but she said the country’s mentality still works against women.

“We are a European country and also an Asian country, too, and the public mentality holds that a woman should occupy a certain place,” Matviyenko said.

Andreyeva, who deals with men looking for armed protection, agrees that being tough is the only way to survive in Russia’s male-dominated world.

“There is sexism that men demonstrate during negotiations,” she said. “Many of them believe that women have to stay in their place. Polite people just hide it, but it is part of a macho psychology, which Russian women need to accept if they want to work in business.”

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