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Sobchak Campaign Teams Up With Igor Malashenko, Who Once Helped Yeltsin

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Ksenia Sobchak (Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS)

In her first press conference since announcing her bid for the presidency, Ksenia Sobchak on Tuesday said Igor Malashenko, who once helped Boris Yeltsin to the presidency, would be joining her campaign team.

Sobchak unexpectedly announced last week she would run in presidential elections in March next year. Although President Vladimir Putin has not yet made his candidacy official, he is expected to run and win.

With Russia's prominent opposition politician Alexei Navalny barred from running, Sobchak has been dismissed by some observers as a "spoiler candidate," meant to distract attention.

Speaking to journalists at a packed theater in central Moscow on Tuesday, Sobchak, whose earlier career in reality television has won her the nickname of Russia's Paris Hilton, was defiant about her role in the elections.

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"You can laugh at me, but I understand show business," she told journalists. "My job is to rewrite the rules of the show — to bring a new face to the show."

Addressing concerns that she is not a real opposition candidate — with Sobchak's father once having acted as Putin's mentor — she said: "I believe that I will help bring people to the elections against everyone — and against Vladimir Putin."

"Of course for some Putin is a tyrant and dictator. Others consider him Russia's saviour. But I'm in a difficult position, Putin helped my dad — and practically saved his life."

"I am against the fact that any person, including Putin, should be in power for 18 years," she added.

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The biggest news to come out of the press conference —which her critics have dismissed as the kickoff to a race which will be more show than substance — was the announcement that Igor Malashenko would lead her campaign.

Malashenko was president of NTV, an independent television channel founded by a group of leading television journalists, before joining Boris Yeltsin's campaign team to engineer his presidential victory in 1996.

Speaking at the event, Malashenko said he did not support Sobchak's pledge to drop out if Navalny is registered as a candidate.

But Sobchak gave her word to support Navalny if he is allowed into the race, despite a criminal conviction his supporters say is politically motivated.

On Crimea, the peninsula annexed by Russia from Ukraine in March 2014, Sobchak said: "according to international law, Crimea is Ukraine's. Period."

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