The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why My Ksenia-phobia Is Acting Up (Op-ed)

Her chances of winning are zilch, but her campaign will send the "Ksenia Sobchak" brand soaring

By Artemy Troitsky

January 23, 2018

Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

There are official statistics on this no doubt, but even the average television viewer in Russia knows firsthand that Ksenia Sobchak – the celebrity presidential hopeful – is talked about more by Russian media than anyone else, except for President Vladimir Putin and opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Sobchak is easily more famous than than Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Rosneft chief Igor Sechin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov or even the scandalous pop star Sergei Shnurov.

At the same time, it's difficult to pin down what she actually does. Sobchak is often described

as a journalist and TV anchor, but somehow that falls short of the mark. "Socialite" is a bit closer. "Party girl" and "IT girl" conveys some, though not all, of who she is. And now, she is also becoming known as a "politician."

Last year, 2017, was "her year" — the year of the Rooster according to the Chinese horoscope.

Ms. Sobchak was born in 1981 into the family of Anatoly Sobchak, a lawyer who later gained notoriety as a political democrat and mayor of St. Petersburg.

At 17, Ksenia moved out on her own and two years later moved to Moscow where she earned a degree in Political Science from the prestigious Moscow State University of International Relations.

Related article: Socialite Ksenia Sobchak Announces Bid for Russian Presidency

I first heard her name in the early 2000s, when she was gaining a reputation for being a ubiquitous and energetic party girl who had romances with famous men and craved being the center of attention at VIP parties.

At the time, I said in a column that resembled someone's successful high-society mistress. She called me to chew me out in response, explaining that she did not "belong" to anyone and that she supported herself as a TV anchor with a monthly salary of $15,000.

I apologized, although I never did watch the reality show in which she starred, Dom 2, which by all accounts was terrible. She occasionally performed in songs, videos, and movies – but never to great acclaim.

Thanks to her television appearances and exploits as a socialite, Sobchak became a household name among both the general population and Moscow's high society. Essentially, she was "famous for being famous" and, unsurprisingly, was often referred to as "Russia's Paris Hilton."

But she was also smart. Not only did she live life in the fast lane, she managed to leverage her fame to become one of only a handful of TV anchors in high demand as a host of corporate and VIP events, often taking in $100,000 or more for a single appearance.

For ordinary audiences, she gave lectures on "How to Achieve Success." And Sobchak had every right to do so, having truly become one of the symbols of prosperity in the 2000s.

Her career then took a sharp and unexpected turn – interesting in itself because these sorts of shifts are unusual in Russia. In December 2011, at the age of 30, Ms. Sobchak – the daughter of Putin's erstwhile mentor, Anatoly Sobchak – became a regular at huge opposition protests.

Related article: What's Behind Ksenia Sobchak's 'Against All' Bid for the Presidency?

On Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, she took the microphone and announced, "I am Ksenia Sobchak, and I have something to lose by being here with you!" (She, in fact, did lose some of her TV contracts and corporate appearances as a result of

showing up at the marches.)

What was motivating this glamorous celebrity? Was it the memory of her father's public life? A sincere concern for the shameful situation in the country? A desire to be at the forefront of the latest trend? Her desire to appear before the crowds and TV cameras?

I think it was a combination of all these things, plus a bit of romantic fervor stemming from her "relationship" with the young protest leader Ilya Yashin.

That all ended in 2013 – the protest movement as well as Sobchak's involvement with Yashin and the opposition. She soon married actor Maxim Vitorgan and the young family passed the otherwise traumatic year of 2014 serenely. Sobchak's career gradually returned to normal, including TV, radio, and corporate appearances – although she was now banned from state-owned TV.

It seemed as if the stormy stage of her peripatetic lifestyle had passed and that she had settled into a comfortable routine – especially after she gave birth to a son, Plato, in November 2016.

But no! Ksenia Sobchak is no creature of comfort. She is an adventurer who wants to experience everything possible in life! In October 2017, following a flurry of rumors, denials and hints, Sobchak announced that she would run for president. Her husband expressed support.

Her motives are perfectly understandable. On the one hand, it is a challenge, the ideal outlet for her oversized ambitions, temperament and sense of adventure.

Related article: Ksenia Sobchak, Russia's Star Presidential Candidate, Will Be Heard

I am somewhat acquainted with Ms. Sobchak and know her personality type well – vain, intelligent, driven, incredibly energetic and with a fluid sense of morality. She is right at home in politics.

On the other hand —and with all emotion aside — this is a unique opportunity for Sobchak to win a whole new degree of status, recognition, and yes, personal wealth.

Consider this example: Sobchak was a virtually unknown beyond Russia's borders and or the Russian diaspora. Now BBC, CNN and other international media have spread her name around the world.

After all, she is competing against Putin. Of course, her chances of winning are zilch, as she herself admits, but her high-profile presidential campaign will send the "Ksenia Sobchak" brand flying to unprecedented heights.

It is no secret that Sobchak announced her candidacy only after consulting with the Kremlin and securing Putin's personal blessing. Why did the schemers in the presidential administration back her bid? Because they knew it would increase voter turnout and lend legitimacy to an otherwise dismally lifeless election with a foregone outcome.

Compared to the other candidates from the so-called liberal opposition, Sobchak comes with

two distinct advantages as far as the Kremlin is concerned.

First, she has near familial ties to Putin, who began his political career working under her father in St. Petersburg. (There is an unproven, though widespread, rumor that Putin is Sobchak's godfather.) And Sobchak honors that relationship by criticizing everything and everyone – corruption, government censorship, the courts, the *siloviki* – except Putin himself.

It remains unclear just how far her obeisance extends. Second, Sobchak is the least popular of all the potential opposition candidates: her rating is even lower than that of Alexei Navalny, whom the authorities consistently demonize as a "U.S. agent" and a "criminal." The authorities can therefore rest assured that she will not win too many votes.

Related article: Putin Takes on Sobchak at Annual Presser, Snubs Navalny

The opposition-minded 15–20 percent of the population that Sobchak is naturally relying on for support does not especially like her. This is, first, because of her thinly veiled "contract" with the Kremlin.

Second, her program is not radical enough and is full of compromises: she feels that the only realistic way to influence the authorities is to "integrate" the opposition into state structures.

And third, most advocates of decisive change view a corporate celebrity such as Sobchak as a fraudulent, a parody and a cheap substitute for the "real" leader of the anti-Putin front, Alexei Navalny.

Obviously, Ksenia Sobchak cannot hope to pull more than a miniscule number of votes away from Putin's traditional conservative electorate: pensioners, communists and supporters of Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

She simply holds no appeal for them whatsoever. That means her only hope lies with deserters from the Navalny camp – most of who are calling for a boycott of these elections – and the sentimental intelligentsia who traditionally vote for the "old school" Yabloko Party leader Grigory Yavlinsky.

Polls show Sobchak garnering 3 percent of the vote at most. She knows the odds perfectly well and yet it doesn't dissuade her. Does she do it in order to promulgate the liberal platform on the atrocious state-owned TV channels? Many thanks for that! Or does she do it to promote her own name around the world? That is probably closer to the truth. Is this the biggest PR stunt of her life?

Something tells me that once these elections are over, Sobchak's "political convictions" and her political career will evaporate just as suddenly as they appeared.

Artemy Troitsky is a journalist and writer, now teaching in Tallinn, Estonia. The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/23/ksenia-phobia-op-ed-a60257