

With Russia's Presidential Elections Looming, Ksenia Sobchak Has Already Moved On

"This presidential campaign was just the beginning."

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

March 16, 2018



Maxim Shemetov / Reuters

Vitaly Shkliarov was tired. But with just two days to go until Russia's presidential election, Ksenia Sobchak's campaign strategist could see the finish line — and sleep — in sight.

Sobchak, however, was only getting started.

On Thursday afternoon, the clock was counting down until the former reality television star was due to make a surprise announcement. It was curious timing given that her presidential campaign was supposed to be drawing to a close.

With most of her staff off preparing for the big reveal at a concert hall nearby, Shkliarov found himself almost alone in his candidate's eerily quiet offices, a former factory on the banks of the Moscow River.

"We will be launching a new party with Dmitry Gudkov," Shkliarov told The Moscow Times, referring to the opposition leader and former Duma deputy. "Putin's time is coming to an end, and we are planning for that future."

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If the latest figures are anything to go by, President Vladimir Putin's time may not be up quite yet. Trailing by 67 points, Sobchak has just two percent of the vote, according to the latest state-sponsored [poll](#). The easy favorite, with 69 percent, is Putin.

Assuming he is voted back into the Kremlin on March 18, Putin will be president for another six years. Preparing for the future maybe Sobchak's best bet.

"We want to make politics sexy for the youth, the way Obama did in the United States," said Shkliarov, a Belarusian who came to Russian politics after working for the former U.S. president and Democratic candidate, Bernie Sanders. "This presidential campaign was just the beginning."

As part of her whirlwind bid to win over the electorate, Russia's "it" girl turned opposition leader toured the country and state-run television channels, flaunting liberal values.

With the press on her heels, she spoke out about gender equality, gay rights and the rule of law. At her first press conference as a presidential candidate, she brazenly declared that the Crimea peninsula, annexed by Russia four years ago to Western uproar, belonged to Ukraine. "Period."

"Of course it's been healthy that she has managed to talk about these issues on state channels," political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky told The Moscow Times. "But she is not a politician."

Sochak, whose father was the mayor of St. Petersburg and mentored an early-career Putin, is among those on the ballot dismissed as a "spoiler" candidate. Pundits and rivals have accused her of being planted by the Kremlin to stir intrigue around an otherwise predictable election.

They have also charged her of drawing attention from Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader barred from standing in the election and whose anti-corruption investigations led to nationwide street protests last year.

"If anything, all she really did during this campaign was hurt Navalny," Pavlovsky said.

At the concert hall later that evening, one of Sobchak's staffers told The Moscow Times he thought the former reality star's bid was, at first, "sort of a joke." But he was persuaded to join last month, he said, after seeing how Sobchak had "made waves."

"A lot of my friends have started to come around to her," Khadijah-Murat Seferbekov, 22,

said. "There will always be people who say she is a farce, but look at what we've accomplished."

As several hundred Sobchak supporters trickled in, campaign staffers milled about in front of the stage wearing shirts that read "Spring is coming." Behind them, a video showed a barren city where robots, perhaps symbolizing the presidential administration, attacked sprouting plants that seemed determined to grow nonetheless.

"What the hell are we watching?" said one Sobchak supporter to another.

When Sobchak and Gudkov finally took to the stage, their speeches were likewise incongruous, switching between the need to focus on the upcoming elections and looking to the future. In addition to announcing their new Party of Change, they spoke of the need for free speech, for free elections, for new leadership. "Do you want change?" they shouted.

But just like when Sobchak kicked off her presidential campaign, her new party already has its doubters.

Earlier, Pavlovsky, the political analyst had dismissed her plans. "We don't need another PARNAS or Yabloko," he said listing other opposition parties. "We need something different — and I don't think these people have a real understanding of the current political situation."

Sobchak's strategist Shkliarov, though, already had his talking points prepared. "The political landscape here is like a desert," he said. "Any sprouts, flowers, or trees can only be a good thing."

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