

Ksenia Sobchak and the Russian Presidential Election: A Spoiler Candidate or more than the Eye Meets?

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She has been called the Russian Paris Hilton and her name invariably appears with the epithet 'socialite'. Yet, Ksenia Sobchak is a chameleon, who has made several career changes, as unlikely as turning from reality show host into journalist for the Russian independent TV station *Dozhd*. Not least she is the daughter of the late mayor of St. Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak. It was the liberal Sobchak who, in 1990, hired Vladimir Putin and in doing so launched his political career.

Because of this close link between Putin and father Sobchak most Western media were convinced that Ksenia Sobchak, when she recently announced she would run for Russian president in March 2018, was a fake opposition candidate, a decorum candidate put forward by the Kremlin to divide the opposition and to give the elections more legitimacy. Among Russian oppositionists the opinions were divided, with some (including Alexei Navalny) dismissing her as a puppet candidate of the Kremlin, while others gave her the benefit of doubt.

As all have to rely on a degree of speculation, this type of debates easily turn into polarised disagreements between believers and non-believers. Self-evidently, few will doubt that the Kremlin *is* capable of putting forward its own 'opposition' candidate (during the previous presidential elections Mikhail Prokhorov was often named as the Kremlin opposition candidate). But the fact that this is a likely strategy as such does not allow to say with certainty that one particular candidate is a strawman.

But if we cannot know with absolutely certainty, maybe we are wasting our time having this discussion altogether. Maybe it is more interesting to look at how things will develop around Ksenia Sobchak's candidature. Because, if we assume she is the Kremlin's spoiler candidate, there is never a guarantee that the Kremlin strategy will work flawlessly. Ksenia Sobchak profiles herself as the representative of a young generation, who reached adulthood after Putin's ascent to power and are often much more critical about Russia's political leaders than older generations. Sobchak's campaign is built around the idea 'protiv vsekh' (against all). This is a reference to an option on the Russian ballot to vote against all running candidates, which was abolished in 2006. In other words, she claims to campaign as a protest against the ruling political class – though she has been criticised for not turning against Putin as a person. A part of the urban, educated younger generations may recognise themselves in this. Putin's approval rates may be high (consistently over 80% since the annexation of Crimea, according to the Levada center), but approval rates for the government were under 50% for most of 2017 and around 30% of the population believes Russia is on the wrong track. In other words, a substantial part of the Russian population is unhappy with the state of affairs. And Sobchak is able to reach many of them directly. She has 5.4 million followers on Instagram.

Sobchak is not a newly invented oppositionist. She has been active in the Bolotnaya protests during the elections of 2011 and 2012. There is an interesting video she made during previous presidential elections called 'I am voting in favour', suggesting Putin. With this video she seemed to join the ranks of many fellow celebrities who were pressured to speak out in favour of Putin during the 2012 presidential campaign. But the [video](#) has a rather unexpected plot turn, it is worth checking it out.

Sobchak spoke out against the annexation of Crimea, stating that it was a violation of the 1994 Budapest memorandum (while statements of Navalny in 2014 suggested he was opposed to a return of Crimea to Ukraine). It is with this sort of statements, if they get repeated and proliferated, that Sobchak could add a new dimension to the elections. Not to win them or even endanger Putin's victory (current opinion polls suggest a very bleak result, as they do for Navalny), but by saying things that make the Kremlin feel uncomfortable and to give voice to opinions which are currently marginalised.

It remains to be seen how her campaign will develop and how much (social) media attention she will receive. But, rather than discussing whether Ksenia Sobchak is the spoiler candidate of the Kremlin or not, let us focus on whether her campaign provokes any new debates, whether it puts a discourse in the spotlights which is usually not very visible in the mainstream media. After all, even if the Kremlin seeks to steer the election, this does not guarantee that all goes according to plan.