

Russia's Presidential Elections: What Is Behind Ksenia Sobchak's Candidacy?

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Featured image: Sobchak at a demonstration in Moscow in May 2012 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Last week, the Russian socialite and presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak spent three days in the US, talking to politicians and appearing at think tanks as part of her presidential campaign. Her candidacy signals an attempt by sections of the Kremlin to find channels to a rapprochement with US imperialism, and to close ranks within the ruling class.

She concluded her three-day trip to the United States on February 7 with a presentation at Columbia University's Harriman Institute, one of the most important think tanks dealing with US imperialist foreign policy in the former Soviet Union. She had previously spent two and a half days in Washington, where she toured think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), spoke at Georgetown University and attended the national prayer breakfast at the invitation of the Trump White House. She also gave interviews on CNN and other TV shows.

It is fair to assume that, outside a small layer within the political elites, no one in the US or Western Europe knew anything about Ksenia Sobchak prior to this trip. Yet in Russia, she is one of the best known public figures. As the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, who was the mayor of St. Petersburg in the 1990s and mentor to both Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, she has been part of the ruling circles of Russia since her childhood. The Sobchak family stood at the very center of the violent mafia wars over economic control and political power that dominated the 1990s, and Ksenia Sobchak has counted many of those who have destroyed the Soviet state and robbed it among her closest friends.

While she initially made her name as the "Russian Paris Hilton", posing for Russian *Playboy* and playing in various reality TV shows, like many children of the Russian political elite, she has also obtained a degree from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), which has traditionally trained the cadre for the Russian government and state apparatus. In the past few years, she has professed political ambitions, as a self-proclaimed leader of the liberal opposition movement and the protests in Russia's capital in 2011-2012.

Her current presidential bid is formally backed by the Civil Initiative, one of many, often short-lived, pseudo-liberal parties and groupings. Polls indicate that she might receive less than 1 percent of the votes on March 18.

Sobchak announced her candidacy contesting Vladimir Putin, who is widely expected to win the elections on March 18, shortly after the main leader of the so called liberal opposition, Alexei Navalny, had been banned from participating. Navalny strongly opposes Sobchak's

candidacy and has instead advocated a boycott of the elections.

The most obvious question about her candidacy is: what is its purpose?

Sobchak herself has acknowledged that she discussed with Putin personally before announcing it. Her entire trip to the United States was covered widely not only by the American, but also by the Russian state-owned media.

In her presentations at the CSIS in Washington and Columbia's Harriman Institute, she emphasized her orientation toward the West and commitment to an Orange Revolution type policy. Leaving aside her platitudes about "liberalism", "democracy", "transparency", and "honesty", a script well known by now by everyone who follows the machinations of US imperialist foreign policy and its lackeys in the former Soviet Union, her program boils down to this:

- Rapprochement with NATO and the US in particular, and steps toward integrating Russia into the European Union. Bound up with that would be a significant decrease in military spending (now 20 percent of Russian GDP).
- Unconditional defense of private property ("property is sacred") and the need for a "strong state" to protect it.
- The opening up of Russia to foreign investors, including the right of foreigners to invest in and own parts of Russia's key industries, oil and gas among them.

Her empty slogans about improving the educational system or laments about the poor state of hospitals are of course nothing but window dressing. The opening up and restructuring of the Russian economy would transform Russia, now basically a semi-colony of world imperialism on an economic level, into a full-blown playground for imperialism and its companies. It would result in massive attacks on the already dramatically low living standards of the working class.

The "democracy" that Sobchak envisions is the "democracy" and "freedom" of the oligarchs and aspiring entrepreneurs to grab whatever wealth they can get, too much of which, in their opinion, is now under the control of Putin, his friends and allies, and the state.

Speaking at the Harriman Institute, Sobchak stated that she was in close discussions with the ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whom Putin put in jail largely in order to prevent a sell-off of the Russian oil industry to American companies.



Ksenia Sobchak with Timothy Frye, the director of the political science department and head of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University on February 7 (Source: WSWWS)

Khodorkovsky's imprisonment was supported by wide layers of the population, who were outraged by the open criminality with which Khodorkovsky had attained his fortune in the 1990s. In late 2013, Putin released him in an effort to appease the imperialist powers and pave the way for a rapprochement—a move that did not yield the results the Kremlin had hoped for. On the contrary, with the coup in Ukraine, both the US and the EU have embarked on a course of aggressive confrontation with Russia.

While advocating policies that are associated with the liberal opposition and a Maidan-style movement, she rejects the repetition of such a movement in Russia, and considers the call for a boycott by Navalny as “too radical”. Rather, her goal is “to influence Putin, to influence the system” in the next six years by attaining a substantial vote.

In a telling moment at Columbia's Harriman Institute, she warned that anything else could lead to a revolution “which will be very different from ours” (meaning from that proposed by the liberal opposition); one that would be “much more radical than even what Navalny stands for. And no one wants that, so let's keep it in this framework of discussions”—discussions that would, of course, take place only within the ruling circles, and behind the back of the population.

She went on to explicitly propose that a “compromise candidate” for Putin's succession should be found, suggesting the ex-finance minister Alexei Kudrin, one of Putin's closest advisors and a darling of the international financial elite.

Sobchak's candidacy is a result and expression of the deep crisis of the Russian oligarchy.

Amid the continuously escalating confrontation with US imperialism, power struggles behind the doors of the Kremlin have intensified. Gleb Pavlovsky, a former advisor to Putin, who is now working for the US imperialist think tank Carnegie, wrote last fall:

“[I]t is now possible to talk about a system that operates without Putin. He is not acting in sync with his inner circle. Each feels uncomfortable with the

other, as the president grows more stingy about intervening to resolve the power struggles within the elite.... The atmosphere inside the government apparatus is becoming more fearful, and the rivalry with the security agencies is intensifying. Arrests taking place in Kremlin circles are not carried out according to "Putin's plan," ordered from above, but are rather a manifestation of competition for power.... The near-term political goal is not about getting to a post-Putin Russia, it is about planning a transition. But it's worth noting that the discussions are all about preserving the system, not about preserving Putin."

These power struggles are fueled not only by fear of a war with the United States, but also the rising class tensions in Russia and internationally. As poverty and social dissatisfaction have been growing in Russia, the Kremlin has no doubt viewed with a great deal of anxiety the eruption of working class struggles in the Middle East and Europe.

There is a real fear by Putin and substantial sections of the Russia oligarchy that an escalation of the power struggles within the elites, including with the liberal opposition, could help provoke unrest within the Russian working class. Ksenia Sobchak, who has been shaped by and experienced first-hand the vicious struggles for power in the oligarchy since the 1990s, shares this fear.

In contrast to Navalny, she represents a wing within the oligarchy and upper middle class that sees a repetition of a Maidan-type movement in Russia as both unrealistic and too destabilizing. In her view, the "questions in dispute", i.e., to what extent Russia's market should be opened to foreign capital and how a rapprochement with the West can be achieved, can and have to be discussed behind closed doors by representatives of the liberal opposition, US imperialism, and ruling circles within the Kremlin.

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