

# Anatoly Sobchak (1937-2000): leading representative of capitalist "reform" in Russia

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In the early hours of February 20, Anatoly Sobchak, the former mayor of Saint Petersburg, died in Svetlogorsk in the Kaliningrad district. A confidant of acting President Vladimir Putin, Sobchak was on an election tour in support of Putin's candidacy in the coming elections when he died. He was buried on Thursday, February 24 at the Nikolsky cemetery in Saint Petersburg.

The cause of death was first reported to be either a heart attack or kidney failure. The autopsy carried out in Saint Petersburg confirmed the original diagnosis: Sobchak died of massive heart failure.

Cardiology professor Nikita Sinegolovsky, who had been providing Sobchak with medical care since 1997, stated to the *Interfax* news agency that Sobchak had been on the verge of death for the past two-and-a-half years. According to the professor, Sobchak was hospitalized in 1997 because of a third, very serious heart attack. His condition was so serious that the doctors treating him could not decide for a month whether Sobchak was fit to be transferred to another hospital, where he was scheduled for heart surgery.

However, another version of Sobchak's death is also being circulated in the Russian media, according to which he was murdered. The news program "Serkalo" (Mirror) broadcast on Russia's *RTR* channel ran an interview with two close acquaintances of Sobchak, actor Oleg Basilavshily of Soviet folk play fame, and TV reporter Bella Kurkova. Both said Sobchak had been feeling very well recently. They said he was full of energy and his health condition was stable. They doubted the truth of reports that the former Saint Petersburg mayor had died of a heart attack.

These doubts could receive added fuel from an interview, published February 22, which Sobchak gave to the newspaper *Kommersant-Daily* shortly before leaving for Kaliningrad. When asked by the reporter whether he had recovered from his illness, Sobchak replied: "I had an extensive round of treatment this summer, as a result of which I feel fine and can work normally." Then he added: "There have been attempts to kill me, to destroy me. But, thank God, I am healthy and feel full of power and energy."

Some announcements from the media indicate that new, scandalous revelations confirming or disproving the possibility of murder may be published this week. Whatever the final answer to this question may be, the death of Anatoly Sobchak is of considerable political significance. He was one of the most important Russian politicians, a man who succeeded in gaining great popularity during the perestroika period, and then became one of the ideological and political leaders of capitalist restoration.

In the words of Alexander Belyayev, who ran the Saint Petersburg

City Council when Sobchak was mayor, "The death of Raissa Gorbachev, Yeltsin's resignation from the presidency and the death of Sobchak mark the end of the epoch of first changes, romantic hopes and peaceful revolution. These are important figures in our country's history. Their significance lies in their formulation of modern Russian ideology. In a sense, Sobchak is the spiritual father of those Saint Petersburgers who are now working their way towards the top positions in Moscow, most significantly, Vladimir Putin."

The president of Indyem Foundation, Georgy Satarov, who worked in the Yeltsin administration for many years, said: "The death of Sobchak is yet another indication of the end of the romantic period of Russia's democratization. This epoch has come to an end, and is now making way for another, much tougher and more pragmatic period."

A similar commentary was published by the *APN* news agency: "The death of Sobchak marks the beginning of a new epoch. This is an epoch embodied by Putin, and one in which tough pragmatists with epaulets on their shoulders will quickly take control of the nation—a nation which is experiencing a severe hangover after the intoxication of a spree of liberty unseen since the days of Prince Vladimir." [Prince Vladimir Monomach (1053-1125) brought about the second flourishing of the Kievan-based empire of "Rus"—editor's note].

*APN* underscored the contradictory nature of Sobchak's political role, writing: "Sobchak despised the organs of state security with every fibre of his soul. And yet he fostered the rise of KGB Lieutenant Colonel Putin, who has now concentrated the greatest power in the land in his hands. This, surely, symbolises the ambivalence and profound inner contradictions of Sobchak's generation."

Anatoly Sobchak was a highly characteristic representative of those sections of the former Soviet intelligentsia who became convinced in the 1980s that the only alternative to the crisis of the Soviet Union was the liquidation of the social and economic conditions created in 1917 by the October Revolution and the re-introduction of capitalist relations. As the capitalist reforms began to take shape, this section of the intelligentsia started making money, or advanced to lucrative positions within the new state apparatus.

One of the main axioms this social stratum latched onto was the premise that private property was the only reliable guarantee for an effectively run economy and protection against the omnipotence of the bureaucracy, and that it formed the "natural" foundation for creating a democracy.

According to these conceptions, the development of capitalist relations would inevitably lead to the growth and consolidation of democracy in Russia. But, as subsequent events were to show, the

opposite was true. Consequently, people like Sobchak were confronted by the profound disappointment of the masses in the mid-90s, and lost their former popularity. The actual result of their political efforts was the emergence of semi-criminal and authoritarian power structures through which a small minority enriched itself at the expense of the broad majority of the population.

The biography of Anatoly Sobchak is typical of that of a man from the provinces who “made something of himself”. Already during the perestroika period he had attained a high position in the second most important city of the Soviet Union.

Sobchak was born on August 10, 1937 in the Siberian town of Chita. After completing law studies at Leningrad State University (LGU) in 1959, he first worked as a lawyer, then moved on to become the head of the Legal Council of Stavropol Region in southern Russia.

In 1962 he returned to Leningrad, where he took his doctor's degree and taught at various colleges and universities. He worked at the LGU law faculty starting in 1973, and later became dean of the faculty. In the 1980s he was made a professor and appointed director of the LGU's Institute of Economic Law.

During the perestroika years he was one of the most active supporters of Gorbachev's reforms. He became a candidate for membership in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in May 1987, and was accepted as a full member in June 1988. Such were the beginnings of his political career.

In 1989 he was elected to the House of Deputies, and was voted onto the Supreme Council of the USSR at the first Congress of Deputies. In this capacity Sobchak headed the Deputies' Commission investigating the bloody events of spring 1989 in Tiflis, the capital of Georgia.

As is known from countless publications and memoirs, the relatively young, assiduous legal expert from Leningrad soon attracted the attention of Mikhail Gorbachev, who gave him his full support. Gorbachev regarded Sobchak as a loyal supporter of his reforms.

But as the perestroika period drew to a close, Sobchak switched sides and joined Gorbachev's opponents, participating in June 1989 in the “Inter-Regional Deputies Group”, which had been formed to support Yeltsin and a program of radical capitalist reforms.

In June 1991 Sobchak was elected mayor of Leningrad. One of his first official acts was to change the name of the city to Saint Petersburg. He remained mayor until July 1996, when he lost the election to his former deputy Vladimir Yakovlev, the current mayor of Saint Petersburg.

During the first half of the 90s, Sobchak was a loyal Yeltsin follower, supporting the Minsk Treaty of 1991 which dissolved the Soviet Union and the military attack on the House of Parliament in the autumn of 1993. If he criticised the Kremlin at all, it was on the grounds of what he considered its inconsistent efforts in carrying out policies that favoured the new private owners.

After being voted out of office as mayor of Saint Petersburg, he began to encounter difficulties. On October 3, 1997 he was escorted by OMON special forces to the public prosecutor's office, where he was obliged to testify as a witness in cases involving abuse of authority by the former municipal administration. Sobchak suffered a heart attack during questioning, and had to be taken to Saint Petersburg's Hospital 122, where he was revived.

He was transferred from there to the Military Academy's clinic for cardiac and vascular diseases, which was run by one of his closest friends, and then, for further treatment, discreetly flown by private air plane to France, where he underwent heart surgery.

Until July 1999 he remained in voluntary emigration in France, and appeared before the public there at lectures held at the Sorbonne and other universities. He published numerous articles and two books, one of which was entitled *A Dozen Knives in Sobchak's Back*. At the same time, the Russian Chief State Prosecutor's Office opened proceedings against him on charges of corruption and misuse of authority.

The political atmosphere in Moscow changed in the spring of 1999. The impeachment proceedings against Yeltsin failed, and Chief State Prosecutor Yuri Skuratov, who had launched the campaign against Sobchak, was removed from office. This enabled Sobchak to return to Russia.

Sobchak now made his last attempt at establishing himself as a major political figure, but lost in the 1999 parliamentary elections when he stood in his old Saint Petersburg constituency. From that point on until his death, he was an active supporter of Putin, becoming his official confidant and adviser.

The evolution of Sobchak during the last 10 years of his life is characteristic of the transformation that occurred in the post-Soviet regime as a whole.

Sobchak began his political career as an opponent of totalitarianism and state violence, an advocate of civil liberties, and a defender of justice and law against despotism. But as things developed, these democratic impulses increasingly took on a purely declamatory character.

The logic of the capitalist reforms demanded the implementation of a hard-line policy that would secure a historically unparalleled distribution of former state property to a thin layer of private owners. A form of Social Darwinism accordingly became the mainstay of Sobchak's politics.

When the terrible social consequences of Yeltsin's reforms became increasingly apparent and (mainly Western) newspapers began publishing articles about the poverty of Russia's average citizens, Sobchak demonstratively and categorically denied that there were any legitimate grievances. Typical was his response, while on a lecture tour in the US (at the University of Michigan), to a member of the audience who quoted a *New York Times* article describing the catastrophic social conditions in Russia. Sobchak responded by saying the *Times* article reminded him of the methods used by Stalin's *Pravda*.

After his return from French emigration in mid-1999, Sobchak declared that Russia needed a new politician in the Stalin mould. Sobchak suggested that this new leader need not be as bloodthirsty as Stalin, but he would have to be every bit as severe and iron-fisted, as this was the only way to force the Russian people to get down to work. At the same time, he published a new book entitled *Anketa—Documents Toward a Biography of Joseph Dzhugashvili-Stalin*.



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