

The Case of Sobchak: A film by, about and for the Russian oligarchy

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The Case of Sobchak, a documentary about the rise and fall of Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) during the period of capitalist restoration, and the political mentor of Vladimir Putin, has been showing in Russia since June 12. It was previously presented at this year's Cannes Festival.

The documentary was made by Ksenia Sobchak, the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, and the film director Vera Krichevskaya, one of the founders of the TV channel "Dozhd" (rain), which is closely associated with Russia's liberal opposition. Ksenia Sobchak herself is one of the most famous figures of the liberal opposition and ran for president earlier this year, after consultations with Putin.

The film by Sobchak and Krichevskaya is based entirely on interviews with the elites that, together with Sobchak, emerged out of the restoration of capitalism in Russia: Anatoly Chubais, Alexei Kudrin; Dmitri Medvedev; Aleksander Korzhakov, the body guard of Boris Yeltsin and one of the key figures in bringing about the downfall of Sobchak; Yeltsin's daughter, Tatiana Iumasheva; and her husband, Valentin Yumashev; as well as Vladimir Putin himself. In many respects it is a film by, about and for the Russian oligarchy.

Although little known to Western audiences, Anatoly Sobchak played a crucial role in Russian politics during capitalist restoration and throughout much of the 1990s, as an ally and, at times opponent, of Boris Yeltsin, the president of Russia from 1991 to 1999. Virtually all key members of the "team" around Putin, including the current prime minister, Dmitri Medvedev, and long-time finance minister, Alexei Kudrin, started their careers as advisers of Sobchak during late perestroika and worked under him in the St. Petersburg city administration until 1996. Anatoly Chubais, one of the main figures of the "shock therapy" also started his career under Sobchak before going to Moscow to head Yeltsin's presidential administration. They are known as the "Piterskaya komanda," the Petersburg team.

Sobchak's rise to political power was bound up with "perestroika," the policy introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, the secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), in 1985 to undermine the last vestiges of the degenerated workers state and restore capitalist property relations. As Sobchak states explicitly in the film, starting in 1985, the central goal was "to destroy the Soviets as an institution."

A professor of law at the State University of Leningrad, Sobchak appealed strongly to layers of the liberal intelligentsia that were seeking to advance their own social position through the restoration of capitalism. He was elected to the Congress of Soviet Deputies for the first time in 1989. In 1991, he was elected mayor of St. Petersburg with an overwhelming majority of 60 percent of the votes. He played a significant role in writing the Russian Constitution of 1993, which legally codified the new class and property relations. All this, of

course, is celebrated by the filmmakers.

What is remarkable about the film is that it emphasizes rather than de-emphasizes the fact that Sobchak's political career, from beginning to end, developed in close collaboration with Putin.

When he was recruited to Sobchak's team, Putin was working as the adviser to the university's director on behalf of the KGB's First Division, the Foreign Intelligence Department. Putin first became "senior" aide to Sobchak and then, in 1991, the vice-mayor of St. Petersburg. Sobchak, his widow tells us, completely trusted "Volodya" (the diminutive of Vladimir in Russian). According to her, Putin's "experiences in Europe" (i.e., his work for the KGB in East Germany) "appealed" to Sobchak. We see family footage showing "Volodya," Sobchak and his daughter, Ksenia, playing at the family's dacha. (Putin also happens to be Ksenia Sobchak's godfather.)

Even the fact that Sobchak had a direct line to the head of the KGB in 1991, who supported the Yeltsin-Sobchak faction against the coup attempt in August by sections of the military and hardcore Stalinists in the CPSU, is openly admitted.

The Sobchak-Putin partnership was symptomatic of a broader socio-political dynamic underlying capitalist restoration in the USSR: the alliance of a section of the so called liberal democratic intelligentsia with the Stalinist bureaucracy, especially the KGB and the military. According to the British journalist Ben Judah, the percentage of FSB (the successor of the KGB) and military personnel in the government rose from 5 percent in 1989 to 33 percent in 1993, and to 46 percent by the end of Yeltsin's presidency.

Sobchak started contesting Yeltsin around 1993/1994, openly attacking him in numerous interviews. This is the only issue that Ksenia Sobchak openly criticizes her father for. In a remark that reveals a lot about her own understanding of "politics" she says: "I often ask myself, Dad: why did you have to give this interview? If you had differences with the president, why didn't you discuss them with him personally?"

Apart from the struggle for economic influence between different sections of the rising oligarchy and political elites, there were mostly two political issues involved in the conflict between Yeltsin and Sobchak.

For one thing, Sobchak feared that the way Yeltsin was pushing for "shock therapy" (which he himself had initially supported) would lead to an uncontrollable social explosion and a resurgence of support for the Stalinist Communist Party, which was seen back then as the only force opposing the brutal attacks on jobs and living standards that accompanied capitalist restoration. The film shows, in one brief instance, footage of average, working Russians holding up signs such as "Our children are starving."

Second, Sobchak considered Yeltsin “incompetent.” The film does not even hint at why anyone would come up with such an assessment. Yeltsin’s notorious alcoholism—he showed up heavily intoxicated at virtually every state visit and government briefing, and was incapable of formulating a single coherent thought, let alone a policy—is politely glossed over. There is only some reference to the fact that government policies were increasingly determined by a close circle of people around Yeltsin, the so called “family,” which included Yeltsin’s chief bodyguard Aleksander Korzhakov, as well as Yeltsin’s daughter and his son-in-law. (As observers noted back then, the “family” would make the president as drunk as possible to push for their policy line.)

Under these conditions, Sobchak tried to consolidate the power of the St. Petersburg elites vis-à-vis those of Moscow, while quite openly preparing to take the helm in the Kremlin.

As the film indicates, Sobchak continued to travel abroad and met with some of the most powerful figures in the major imperialist countries: Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, the then-incumbent US president Bill Clinton, as well as German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Putin, who accompanied Sobchak on many of these visits, told the filmmakers: “It was absolutely obvious to me that the Western leaders treated him like a potential successor to Yeltsin.”

The film avoids discussing the 1996 reelection of Yeltsin, although it pertains directly to the fate of Sobchak. Yeltsin’s reelection was bought and paid for by the United States, a “reelection” he would have almost certainly lost without this support, as Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Stalinist KPRF was, according to all polls, by far the more popular candidate (see: “Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin: When the White House fixed a Russian Election”).

There is little doubt that the decision that Yeltsin, and not Sobchak, should contest Zyuganov was likewise taken not in Moscow or Petersburg, but in Washington. (Yeltsin reportedly did not even want to run for another term.)

Yet the film skips over the election almost entirely and instead spends an almost unbearable 40 minutes or more showing how Sobchak’s downfall as mayor of St. Petersburg was the result of intrigues by Yeltsin’s “inner circle,” and “disproving” the corruption allegations levelled against Sobchak.

With regard to the first, the viewer learns little more than that Korzhakov, who was widely regarded as having the greatest influence on the President, and Iushakov, teamed up to help Sobchak’s opponent, Vladimir Yakovlev, defeat him in the mayoral election.

Putin, with marked contempt, decries those on Sobchak’s team who worked for Yakovlev as “traitors.” He himself, together with Medvedev and Kudrin, immediately left Petersburg for Moscow to work under President Yeltsin once Sobchak had lost to Yakovlev.

Soon thereafter, the so called Case of Sobchak (delo Sobchaka) was opened to finish him off for good. Sobchak was accused of having illegally expanded his Petersburg apartment by a few cubic meters and, when this turned out to be unsubstantiated, of having bought a second apartment which the family apparently never knew about. With evident pleasure the film indulges in showing just how ridiculous these accusations were, implying that just because they were unfounded, there was no stain of corruption on Sobchak’s political career.

In reality, finding a legally valid basis for prosecuting Sobchak, or anyone on his team, would have presented no difficulty. The impediments to a real “case” against Sobchak were political, rather than legal: the mafia ties of Sobchak’s team (St. Petersburg’s city administration largely overlapped with the mafia group Tambov

throughout the 1990s); the selling off of raw materials through St. Petersburg’s ports at the expense of the population and all the other innumerable financial and political crimes committed by the “Piterskaya komanda” were the *modus operandi* of the entire oligarchy. To make them the basis of a high-profile criminal case threatened a political fall-out no one in Moscow or St. Petersburg wanted.

Another approximately 15 minutes of the film are spent on showing how Putin arranged for Sobchak to be flown (illegally) to France for heart surgery in Paris. An old interview shows Boris Nemtsov, who was then working for Yeltsin, and would later become a leading opponent of Putin, expressing his deep concern about Sobchak’s health at the time. (Nemtsov was assassinated in February 2015.) We learn that it was the loyal “Volodya,” with the help of several of Sobchak’s enemies on Yeltsin’s team (including Yumashev), who “saved his [Sobchak’s] life” (Sobchak’s widow). Sobchak’s subsequent attempt at a comeback in Russian politics was a failure, and he died in 2000.

His widow reflects: “It was a good moment for him to die. He had hopes. He had not made it, but he was proud that “his Volodya” [Putin] was now making it [as president].” But, she adds, he would now have a very hard time under Putin (why is not explained).

The question arises: why has this patched-up glorification of one of the most repulsive and opportunistic figures of perestroika and restoration been produced by his own daughter? The answer is that it fulfils a definite political function: Sobchak is portrayed as someone around whom different political forces could be united (liberals and the KGB) and emblematic of a period in which warring factions of the Russian oligarchy could be somehow held together.

The film starts with footage from Sobchak’s funeral in 2000, which was attended by virtually the entire Russian oligarchy and political elite (with the exception of Yeltsin), including Putin, Medvedev, Kudrin, Boris Nemtsov, and the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose jailing in 2003 signalled a falling-out between significant sections of the oligarchy and the Kremlin. It ends by showing a thoughtful Ksenia Sobchak, musing how her wise, late father would have recommended Putin to take the smart decision and give up the presidency.

Taken as a whole, the film amounts to an appeal to Sobchak’s traditional audience—the Kremlin, Washington and the liberal intelligentsia—to make peace and close ranks under conditions of an unprecedented international and domestic political and social crisis. Its line is: We all understand that many of you don’t like Putin and he has to go, but don’t forget that he also has his good sides, he is loyal, he is, ultimately, one of us. We are all in this together, even though things sometimes get nasty. Let’s be reasonable, let’s settle this among ourselves, before it’s too late.



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