

## Glamour Russian Style: The Putin Era

By Birgit Menzel, Germersheim

### Abstract

This article describes the uses of glamour in Russian culture today. While glamour can help sell leaders, celebrities, and journalists to the public, it has a dark underside, which can lead vulnerable young women into the sex trade.

### The Role of Glamour

The phenomenon of glamour has conquered post-Soviet Russia in the new millennium. In the past decade, it became the main ingredient and a symbol of Vladimir Putin's leadership.<sup>1</sup> For some Russian sociologists, it even serves as a substitute for the *national idea*, which was supposed to fill the empty void after the fall of the Soviet Union, just as TV has become the virtual space of *national unity*.<sup>2</sup> Although glamour is a global phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> its Russian version has some distinct features which are inseparable from the conditions in which it occurs, historical as well as contemporary.

This article offers a brief survey of glamour, followed by an analysis of three of its main Russian features: first, the connection between Russian nationalism and Western commercial culture, exemplified by the iconography of Putin; second, the connection between Soviet and post-Soviet stardom linking several generations together as shown by Estrada-superstar Alla Pugacheva; and third the versatile nature of glamour in the world of Russian female journalists, exemplified by Ksenia Sobchak. The article concludes with a brief examination of the dark side of glamour in the age of crisis, which is, in particular, a crisis of the male gender, the connection between seduction, cynicism and crime, and ultimately human trafficking.

### Features of Russian Glamour

Russian glamour has become the cultural equivalent of unchallenged globalized capitalism. It is closely linked to global economic and political developments, especially the media and communications technology that have appeared during the last decade. It is a mixture of the new elite's ostentatious self-representation and a uni-

versal cult of luxury and fashion as the embodiment of a modern, urban lifestyle. Promoted by the mass-media as well as word of mouth, certain images of an exotic and erotic lifestyle are connected with what are to be considered basic values like youth, beauty, health, love and joy of life, spiced up with the intensifying ingredients of passion and adventure, therefore promising freedom and the realization of dreams. Materialism and outer appearance are equally promoted as values as aggressiveness by both sexes. The simulation of risky gambling as a successful model of behavior and an attitude towards life (epitomized by the "hedge-funds" generation and the use of designer drugs) implies simple solutions to problems that do not require work and responsibility and an almost religious faith in recovery after loss.

In Russia, glamour has become a catch-all word covering varying phenomena, aesthetic as well as social and political. According to the Oxford dictionary definition, glamor is "an attractive and exciting quality, especially sexual allure" with a second archaic meaning of "enchantment, magic." It made a new appearance (adopted from the French pronunciation "glamur") before the 2008 presidential election. In 2007, when the central press published 428 articles on glamour and more than one thousand articles appeared on the internet, it was declared "word of the year." Glossy magazines, alongside TV series, fashion and celebrity talk shows, and popular literature, became the most notable means of cultivating glamour as the "dominant aesthetic mode" (Olga Mesropova).<sup>4</sup>

From a social perspective, glamour is ambivalent: as a cult of consumption, it epitomizes freedom and, with its massive popularity, especially among women, it has the positive socio-therapeutic functions of individual self-improvement, promoting a civilized lifestyle and liberating sensuality, especially in a less normative and upwardly mobile society. Sociologist Vera Zvereva pointed out the particularly ambivalent nature of glamour in Russia, appearing unique and exclusive for the elite and at the same time accessible and vulgar for the masses.<sup>5</sup> This symbolic distance between the prosper-

1 Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov: *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia. Shocking chic*, London, New York: Routledge, 2011, Introduction, 1

2 Boris Dubin, "Strana zritelei: Massovye kommunikatsii v segonashnej Rossii," *Zhit' v Rossii na rubezhe stoletii*, Moscow 2007, p. 187–201; Levada-Tsentr 10.9.2009, <http://gtmarket.ru/print/2171>; see also Figure 1 on p. 10.

3 Birgit Menzel, "Russian Discourse on Glamour," *kultura* 6 (2008), 4–8, [www.kultura-rus.de](http://www.kultura-rus.de); Dmitrii Ivanov, *Glëm-kapitalizm*, St. Petersburg, 2008.

4 [www.kinokultura.com/2008/20-gloss-om.shtml](http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/20-gloss-om.shtml)

5 Vera Zvereva, "Glamur v sovremennoi rossiiskoi kulture," *Puti*

ous elite and the masses has shrunk in proportion to the widening gap in income during the past decades, as brands and attributes of luxury, accessories, clothes and perfume have become cheap and accessible in Chinese replicas.

### Putin as a Glamorous Hero

With the election of Vladimir Putin, the public image of the leader radically changed. For the first time in Russian history, the public persona of a political leader has become orchestrated by new (political) technologies and media, and carefully designed by professional managers.<sup>6</sup> Connecting the return to a *vertical of power* with the glamorous appearance of a male hero, Putin has become “Russia’s ultimate celebrity”<sup>7</sup> and *Putin-glamour*<sup>8</sup> the embodiment of the New Russia. The iconographic renaissance of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet past have merged with commercial Western culture, especially Hollywood-glamour.<sup>9</sup> Along with a cult of the president’s hyper-masculinity turning the population into a fan club, this has become one of the main attributes of Putin’s undisputed popularity (he is supported by 70–80% of the population).

Featuring remoteness as an ingredient of any star as well as national hero, Putin remains elusive and enigmatic like the nation’s White Knight (Goscilo, 21), aided by the newly designed biography of an international spy. His public image is shaped in part after the image of Stirlitz, the spy-hero of the Soviet cult TV series of the 1970s—whose actor he celebrated posthumously with a special FSB award—while he, in part, displays a James-Bond-lifestyle. At the same time, his “glamor-

ous image of intrepid (self-) mastery” echoes the slogan of the Stalinist 1930s: “Everyone can become a hero.” Along with the mediatic rituals of annual citizen consulting, real fandom flourishes with *chastushki* (poems), carpets from Turkmenistan, and women fainting for the ideal Putin-husband.

Examples of the crafty choreographed linkage with the imperial past include the ostentatiously luxurious renovation of the Constantine Palace for the president’s personal representation purposes; the replica of the Shapka Monomakha, the legendary crown of the Romanov dynasty (as a present for his 50th birthday in October 2002, by sixty craftsmen from the Urals); and Putin’s appearance in May 2011 at a charity event in St. Petersburg in the presence of several Hollywood stars, where he performed Fats Domino’s song “Blueberry Hill” in English to the enthusiasm of his audience, later multiplied by YouTube.

Implying transcendence, another attribute to glamour and celebrity has been promoted by the quasi-religious “narrative of salvation”—Christian or Leninist—even if at times ironically expressed, for instance in guided tours along paths and stations of his visits throughout the country. Putin’s public persona, a “comics-cum-Hollywood-action-film-image pop culture and new (polit)technology,”<sup>10</sup> combines the energetic virility of a decisive, effective leadership, sketched on the image of both a Machiavellian prince and the Hollywood star<sup>11</sup> Arnold Schwarzenegger, illustrated not only by the world-famous photographs of his bare chest in hunting, shooting and fishing activities, but also at the end of the YouTube comic-film parody “a vova rulit” (now taken off the net), when he kills his enemies with a machine gun from a motorcycle in Schwarzenegger’s “Terminator” style, announcing with his final words, “I’ll be back.”

### Alla Pugacheva: Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Celebrity

Although barely known in Western countries outside of émigré circles, Alla Pugacheva belongs to the leading world superstars, both in duration of celebrity and quantitative success. For nearly four decades, the musical star whom the *New York Times* described as “the goddess of Russian pop, Moscow’s Tina Turner with a hint of Edith Piaf, whose songs have given voice to the yearning of millions”<sup>12</sup> has been “Russia’s most famous

*Rossii 2008: Kultura—Obshchestvo—Chelovek*, Moscow, 2008, p. 130–134

6 Rosalinde Sartorti, “Politiker in der russischen Ikonographie: Die mediale Inszenierung Vladimir Putins,” in: *Kultur in der Geschichte Russlands*, ed. Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, Tübingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2007, p. 333–348

7 Helena Goscilo. “Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity. VVP as VIP objet d’art.” In: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. H. Goscilo, London, New York: Routledge, 2013, 8

8 “‘Putinskii glamur’ v klubakh.” Radioprogram by Elena Fanailova (20.1/16.3.2008) <http://www.svobodanews.ru/Transcript/2008/01/20/20080120120004333.html>.

9 Recent studies have shown the strong impact of Russian emigrants in shaping the Hollywood dream factory. Harlow Robinson. *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood’s Russians. Biography of an Image*, Boston: Northwestern UP, 2007. Another curious fact is that some of the major designers of the post-war American Lifestyle, long-term editors of leading fashion journals such as *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* and co-founders of one of the most powerful trusts for fashion-media, Condé Nast, were Russian emigrants, namely Vladimir Mayakovskii’s last French lover and her husband Tatiana Yakovleva and Alexander Silverman. See their recommendable biography by Francine du Plessix Gray: *Them. A Memoir of Parents*, New York; Penguin, 2005.

10 Goscilo, op. cit., p. 8, 21, 27

11 Helena Goscilo. “Putin’s Performance of Masculinity. The action hero and macho sex-object,” *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, 180–207

12 Alison Smale, “A Superstar Evokes a Superpower,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2000.

woman,<sup>13</sup> among the most highly paid, with great devotion in the media and continuing public interest. Her popularity has been unshaken by the collapse of communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the chaotic 1990s and the new glamourized era of the Putin administration. With twenty million copies of her albums sold, she has been elected eleven times as best singer of the year, and in 2007 *Forbes* rated her third among Russia's fifty greatest living celebrities.<sup>14</sup>

How can this enduring fame be explained especially since to non-Russian eyes Pugacheva does not match any Western conception of a superstar with her heavy figure and often bizarrely tasteless eccentric appearance? According to Olga Partan, with professionalism fading in the post-Soviet decades and "popsa" or fast-track music coming to dominate the entertainment business (named "raskrutka"), Alla Pugacheva has steadily presented a highly professional musical show, which in Soviet times was called Estrada,<sup>15</sup> distinguishing features of which included powerful vocal skills, emotionality and direct personal contact with the audience.<sup>16</sup>

Pugacheva rejected the "return of Rock" in the 1980s and kept seeing herself as a singer for the people, always loyal to her audience and based on cultural tradition. By using texts from both classical poetry, Shakespeare, and Russian poets, like Tsvetaeva, Mandelshtam and Pasternak who had been repressed in Soviet times, for her lyrics, she always connected high and low culture. And, just like in the Soviet past—on stage where she faced less censorship—the diva has rebelled against conventions in post-Soviet years. This applies especially to the gender-roles offered by society, but also to norms of language and style, for instance by using vulgar slang and obscenities next to high romance and classical literary texts.

In the post-Soviet decades, her eccentric on-and-off-stage persona has been covered extensively by the media. Only she could allow herself to rebel against Church decorum, being accepted and even admired by Orthodox priests when she appeared as godmother of her young protégé's baby daughter at her June 2005

church baptism ceremony ignoring the dress code with her usual eccentric clothes and make-up, accompanied by film and media-hype.

Pugacheva's public appearance, in which she generously displays the details of her private life, thus connects what Stephen Gundle has outlined as the oxymoronic qualities of glamour: "sleazy elegance [in her case an incongruity, matched, however by a self-ironic parody of bodily imperfections and the performance-role of a jester-queen], accessible exclusivity, democratic elitism." Sex-appeal, the aristocratic elegance of the elite and excessive vulgarity combines the realization of romantic dreams with the prostitution of the concubines.<sup>17</sup> Most successful stars and celebrities often originate from lower social strata. "The most glamorous figures of the past two hundred years have not been the hereditary rich or legitimate holders of power. They have been outsiders, upstarts, social climbers, and parvenus."<sup>18</sup>

But there is another key to Pugacheva's unsinkable stardom by which she connects and at the same time juxtaposes the Soviet past with the post-Soviet present: she demonstratively lives her life on stage and in private as a mistress, mother and grandmother at the same time, thus offering a liberating message to Russian women, especially at older age. She has repeated affairs with much younger men and celebrated her fiftieth birthday in 1999 in a TV-party next to four former husbands on stage.

But much more significant is that Pugacheva, by constantly co-starring with her daughter Kristina Orbakaite, a big star in her own right, and recently with her grandson, publicly demonstrates the ties of family as primary bonding. This is, however, a primarily female bonding, in which male partners are frequently changing, i.e. dispensable, and females have control over their independent personal and professional life.

This gender-construction confirms what Vera Dunham has called the "strong-woman motif" in Russian culture,<sup>19</sup> but at the same time it strongly contradicts traditional roles of a female in Russia, where mothers and, in particular, grandmothers have always been mythologized as the gendered nation, connected with the soil ("Moist-Mother-Earth") and represented exclusively as post- or a-sexual females. Babushka and sex-appeal is an oxymoron and promiscuity an exclusive right of men.

Pugacheva's public performance of matriarchal autonomy over three generations, including songs about children in the 1980s and about grandchildren in the

13 Olga Partan. "Alla. The Jester-Queen of Russian Pop Culture," *Russian Review* 66 (July 2007), 483–500

14 Olga Partan. "Feminism à la Russe? Pugacheva-Orbakaite's celebrity construction through family bonds," *Celebrity and Glamour*, 2011, 174.

15 E.D. Uvarova (ed.), *Ruskaia sovetskaia Èстрада. Ocherki istorii*, vol. 1–3, Moscow, 1976–1981; David MacFadyen, *Songs for Fat People: Affect, Emotion, and Celebrity in the Russian Popular Song, 1900–1955*, Montréal 2003.

16 According to David Marshall, these features have been main conditions of a musical celebrity status in the early twentieth century. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power. Fame in Contemporary Culture*, Minneapolis, London: U of Minnesota Press, 1997, 155.

17 Stephen Gundle, *Glamour. A History*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

18 Gundle, p. 389.

19 Vera Dunham: The Strong Woman Motif. In: Black, C.E. (ed.): *The Transformation of Russian Society*. Cambridge 1960.

2000s, contradicts both Western and Russian gender roles for stars in the entertainment business. In the discourse on glamour, according to Olga Partan, Alla Pugacheva gives a “specifically Russian twist to the feminist stand of the celebrity image.”<sup>20</sup>

### Glamorous Amazons in the Russian media

Brian McNair has described the main characteristics of Russian journalism in the 1990s as “power, profit, corruption and lies.”<sup>21</sup> In the new millennium, females have become dominant in the Russian media, both the big-run printing press and in TV. “The professional structure of journalism is becoming younger and more attractive to females.”<sup>22</sup> The number of women along with their professional training has grown considerably over the past decade, much more in sensational than in qualitative and investigative journalism. How to explain this phenomenon, especially regarding the re-Sovietization of society, with an economy pushing women out of the professions or to lower levels of income and reputation?<sup>23</sup> And how is it connected to the patriotic turn to a macho-society? I will focus on one aspect, namely female journalists for whom a glamorous appearance is not incompatible with quality journalism, with differing ideological leanings. I argue that Tina(tin) Kandelaki (born 1975), Iulia Pankratova (\*1977), Tatiana Vedeneyeva (\*1953), Olga Bakushinskaia (\*1965), Olga Romanova (\*1966), Larisa Verbitskaia (\*1959) and Yekaterina Andreyeva (\*1961) represent such a new type of Russian journalism<sup>24</sup> and that it is not incompatible with liberal attitudes. Even opposition to the regime has lately been demonstrated by Ksenia Sobchak’s (\*1981) turn after the duma election in December 2011. The daughter of former St. Petersburg mayor Anatolii Sobchak, a former disciple of the famous Kirov school of ballet and graduate in political sciences from the pres-

tigious Moscow diplomatic school MGIMO, Sobchak started out as a journalist of what Zvereva named the radical mainstream-glamour, hostess of demonstratively trite TV-shows like “Blondinka v shokolade” and the TV-reality-show *Dom-2*, an adaptation of the Western *Big-Brother* shows. Being a scandalous glamour-girl, intelligent, beautiful, rich, Sobchak mainly provoked her audience by breaking taboos in sex-related topics and language, and excessive consumption (i.e. a Moscow exhibition of her 450 pairs of shoes). When in May 2006 a delegate of the National Health Committee publicly accused her of “inciting an unhealthy interest in sex” among the population, Sobchak founded a youth-organization “All are Free,” especially for children of the elite. “For me, capitalism is the best means of contraception. If you can live a normal life, with job, education, money and possibilities, why would you want to waste it with diapers, borshch and other pleasures.”<sup>25</sup> But like Pugacheva, Sobchak also propagates family as the highest value in Russian society and repeatedly promotes the reestablished rituals of Soviet marriage and wedding-ceremonies, thus stabilizing the patriarchal type of society. Together with Olga Robski, author of numerous glamour-novels, Sobchak published the novel “How to gain a Millionaire?” an ironic recommendation to climb up the social ladder via marriage by trading female qualities for money.

Since the contested December 2011 Duma election, leading to public protests against Putin’s authoritarian regime, Sobchak has undergone some changes and, following the presidential election returning Putin to the Kremlin in March 2012, openly joined the opposition.<sup>26</sup> During the trial against the music group Pussy Riot, she skillfully conducted a controversial discussion in a TV talk-show, bringing representatives of the church and alternative economy together with underground artists and militant nationalists. In an atmosphere of rising political repression, Sobchak continues to openly provoke the authorities with her now critical political opinions in the public media, especially on state-controlled TV.<sup>27</sup>

### The Dark Side of Glamour

The glamorization of Russia in politics, media and society as a symbol of global capitalism has a dark side, just as globalized crime has been another aspect of the global economy and a consequence of global media-communi-

20 Partan, 174.

21 Brian Mc Nair, “Power, Profit, Corruption, and Lies: The Russian Media in the 1990s,” Curran, J., M.-J. Park (eds): *The Westernizing Media-Studies*. London 2000, 79–94.

22 Svetlana Pasti. “A New Generation of Journalists.” *Russian Mass Media and Changing Values*, ed. A. Rosenholm, K. Nordenstreng, E. Trubina, London 2010, p. 57–75, p. 60; eadem: The St. Petersburg Media in Transformation, *Nordicom Review* 2006, 1 (26), November, p. 69–84; eadem: *The Changing Profession of a Journalist in Russia*. Tampere 2007. See also Andrei Konchalovskii’s film *Glyanets* (RF 2007).

23 Elisabeth Cheauré. “Frauen in Russland,” *Länderbericht Russland*, ed. H. Pleines, H.H. Schröder Bonn, 466–493.

24 According to Russian statistics, in 2011 the following female journalists were most popular: Irina Petrovskaia, Tatiana Lysova, Olga Romanova, Mariia Sittel’, Elena Denezhkina, Larisa Kaf-tan, Yuliia Alekhina, Tatiana Vedeneeva, Ekaterina Andreeva, Natalia Timakova (presidential press secretary), Mariia Shukshina, Larisa Guzeeva, Yuliia Kovalchuk and Svetlana Sorokina.

25 Quoted in Goscilo, Strukov: *Celebrity and Glamour*, 2011, p. 10.

26 See the episode with Sobchak in the Documentary online film project “Srok” by Aleksandr Rastorguev and Pavel Kostomarov from April until December 2012. I owe this information to Eva Binder.

27 “Gosdep” 19.3.2012 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFhPV\\_FIDRk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFhPV_FIDRk)

cation. As one of the keys of glamour is the “language of seduction, as bourgeois ethics has always been related to its attitude towards sexuality, and commercial establishments have always attracted attention and persuaded through suggestions of sex and excess (next to showmanship, magic and religion),”<sup>28</sup> the global economy in the post-communist world has developed its own strategy of exploitation. High rates of unemployment have affected many women and children. Human trafficking has become the largest source of organized crime revenue worldwide since 2000, leaving even the trade with weapons and drugs behind, and—along with children—women from Central and Eastern Europe have become the leading victims of this extremely brutal organized crime.<sup>29</sup> They are being trafficked for various purposes, but commercial sexual exploitation is one of the main purposes. Russia is one of the most significant sources of women trafficked to over fifty nations. The promise of social mobility and success through the *sexbiznes* has seduced a great number of girls and women in countries of the former Soviet bloc, often from provincial towns and remote villages without prospects for a

non-miserable life, who, manipulated by media, promises and illusions, find themselves sold and kidnapped. Hundreds of thousands end up trapped for life in sex-slavery all over the world.

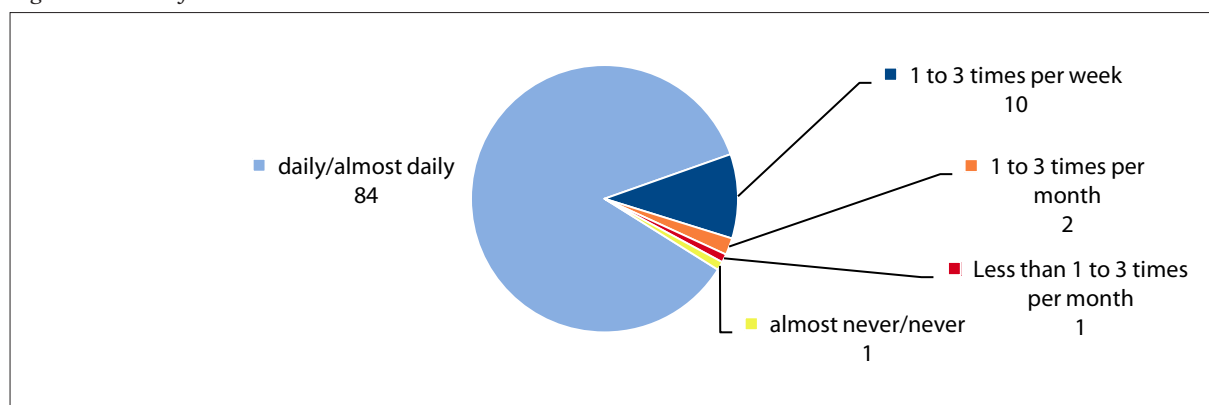
### Conclusion

It remains an unsolved dispute whether glamour is an attribute of certain people, requiring aura and talent, or whether it is a quality attainable for everyone, by training or just money. Since Putin has reestablished an authoritarian regime with a patriotic turn and centralized media, especially TV, glamour, in the social and political elite as well as in the mainstream, has become the main ingredient of the new Russian self-image, expressing the “two main practices of the post-Soviet era—nostalgia and consumption.”<sup>30</sup> Political leaders, pop stars and journalists of both sexes have used glamour for various, sometimes contradictory ends, as weapon, protection or seduction,<sup>32</sup> with results which range from social-therapeutic effects to manipulation and crime. If only in its intensity, mixtures and contradictions, Russian glamour, indeed, has its own face-lifting physiognomy.

#### About the Author

Birgit Menzel is Professor in applied linguistic and cultural science at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz in Germersheim.

Figure 1: How Often Do You Watch Television?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada-Tsentr, January 2010, <http://www.levada.ru/archive/kulturnoe-potreblenie-i-otdykh/kak-chasto-vy-smotrite-televizor>

28 Gundle, p. 9

29 For Human Trafficking, see Victor Malarek: *The Natashas. Inside the Global Sex Trade*, Penguin 2004; <http://www.humantrafficking.org/links/83>. *The CNN Freedom Project* <http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/> and Vitalii Manskiij's documentary film *Deustvennost'* (RF, 2008).

30 Julie Cassiday, Emily Johnson. “A personality cult for the postmodern age: reading Vladimir Putin's public persona,” *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, p. 37–64, p. 40.

31 Gundle, Introduction, *Glamour*, 9