

KAMALA HARRIS IN RUSSIAN MEDIA: GENDERED CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AND THE DELIGITIMIZATION OF POLITICAL FEMININITY IN AUTHORITARIAN DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT *This article examines representations of Kamala Harris in Russian media during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign to explore how character assassination functions in authoritarian contexts. Drawing on sociocultural approaches to character assassination and post-structuralist discourse theory, the study conceptualizes character attacks not only as strategies of reputational damage but also as discursive practices that reproduce normative hierarchies of gender and political legitimacy. The analysis demonstrates that Harris is represented through tropes of emotionality, domesticity, and personalized femininity, thereby depoliticizing her political agency. The findings also complicate interpretations of Russia's conservatism by demonstrating that representations of Kamala Harris cannot be reduced to a coherent traditionalist ideology alone. Instead, they reflect a hybrid assemblage of authoritarian normativity, patriarchal gender expectations, postfeminist individualization, and residual Soviet moral frameworks. The article argues that character assassination in authoritarian media discourse functions less through direct ideological confrontation than through the symbolic regulation of legitimate political subjectivity.*

KEYWORDS

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, GENDERED DEPOLITICIZATION, AUTHORITARIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE, POLITICAL FEMININITY, POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

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INTRODUCTION

This study critically analyzes character assassination strategies (Shirayev et al., 2022) targeting U.S. presidential candidate Kamala Harris, as reflected in Russian media coverage in the months leading up to the U.S. presidential election. Existing scholarship on character assassination has already demonstrated that attacks on Harris in the U.S. context frequently relied on racialized and gendered tropes, including accusations of emotional instability, aggressiveness, inauthenticity, and illegitimacy (Keohane et al., 2025). Donald Trump's public remarks describing Harris as "a lunatic" and "a crazy person" (Huang, 2024) became emblematic of a broader trend of ad hominem attacks circulating in segments of conservative U.S. media (Venkatraman, 2024). At the same time, these framings were not universally shared. Numerous commentators in liberal and international media interpreted Harris's public style and performative expressiveness as signs of resilience, charisma, and authenticity, with some even calling them her "secret weapon" (Wünsch, 2024; Zinoman, 2024).

These polarized interpretations provide an important discursive backdrop for our analysis. However, rather than engaging in a comparative study of U.S., German, and Russian media systems, we focus specifically on how Russian media selectively appropriate, transform, and recontextualize globally circulating gendered tropes surrounding Harris. Following sociocultural approaches within character assassination studies (Samoilenko, 2021), we are particularly interested not in reputational damage or persuasive effects, but in how symbolic attacks participate in the articulation of broader normative and ideological frameworks. From this perspective, character assassination can be understood as a discursive practice through which assumptions about legitimacy, femininity, authority, and political agency are culturally reproduced and normalized.

The purpose of this study is therefore not to claim that sexist or delegitimizing attacks are unique to authoritarian media systems. Similar rhetorical patterns are observable in segments of conservative media within democratic contexts. Rather, our focus is on how such representations function within a more centralized and weakly pluralized media environment, where competing interpretations circulate under significantly different conditions of symbolic contestation. In this context, gendered representations may contribute less to electoral persuasion than to the normalization of particular understandings of political subjectivity, femininity, and public legitimacy.

In the context of heightened geopolitical confrontation following Russia's war against Ukraine, official Russian discourse increasingly constructs the West as a civilizational Other. Against this backdrop, the portrayal of a prominent woman of color from an "unfriendly" nation raises specific representational questions for Russian media discourse. Should such a figure be framed as Russophobic, mocked as a liberal feminist icon, or delegitimized through racialized and gendered stereotypes? Russian media repeatedly mobilize familiar narratives of emotionality, femininity, authenticity, morality, and political legitimacy in representing Harris. President Vladimir Putin himself implicitly reinforced some of these framings during a televised interview on a major state channel – a moment we revisit later

in the analysis. Using the case of Kamala Harris, a highly visible political figure situated at the intersection of racial, gendered, and geopolitical difference, this article investigates how Russian media platforms – including news programming, talk shows, and infotainment genres – construct narrative frames around female political agency and authority.

We employ a sociocultural and discursive framework informed by post-structuralist approaches to media and discourse. Rather than assuming a priori that Russian coverage of Kamala Harris serves fixed ideological functions, we treat this coverage as an empirical case through which the discursive organization of gendered political meaning can be examined. Our aim is not only to analyze how a Western female political figure is represented during a moment of geopolitical confrontation, but also to assess whether such representations illuminate broader mechanisms of symbolic normalization and meaning-making within contemporary Russian media discourse.

The following section situates this inquiry within broader debates on character assassination, gendered political communication, and the discursive boundaries of authoritarian femininities in contemporary Russia. More specifically, we examine which normative assumptions about political femininity, legitimacy, and acceptable political subjectivity are articulated through Russian media representations of Kamala Harris. After outlining our methodological approach and criteria for data selection, we then analyze examples from news programming, talk shows, and infotainment formats. In conclusion, we reflect on what the Harris case reveals about the sociocultural functions of character assassination and about the role of media discourse in stabilizing normative understandings of political subjectivity within contemporary Russian media culture.

STABILIZING HEGEMONY THROUGH CHARACTER ASSASSINATION: A SOCIOCULTURAL AND DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE

The concept of character assassination (CA) emerged in the United States in the 1950s (Davis, 1950) and has since developed into a multidisciplinary field within communication and media studies. Contemporary research on CA spans several key areas, including political communication, rhetoric and persuasion, mediated and digital communication, as well as public relations and strategic communication (Moore et al., 2025). Within these traditions, CA is commonly examined as a communicative practice aimed at damaging reputation, shaping public perception, or influencing political outcomes. While some strands of character assassination research focus primarily on misinformation, deception, and manipulative communication strategies (Samoilenko & Compton, 2025), others conceptualize CA more broadly as a form of symbolic action embedded in media systems, where its effects extend beyond distortion to the structuring of public discourse and audience interpretation (Farnsworth, 2018; Icks & Shiraev, 2014).

In addition to these dominant approaches, a growing body of scholarship examines CA as an instrument of propaganda, symbolic violence, and hegemonic reproduction (Simons, 2019). From this perspective, CA is not reducible to intentional falsehoods but

operates within broader sociocultural and discursive processes that shape political meaning and authority. As Samoilenko (2021) argues, CA should be understood as a relational and co-constructed phenomenon involving multiple actors – including political elites, media institutions, and audiences – whose interactions produce outcomes such as public outrage, reputational crises, and political delegitimization. This sociocultural perspective highlights the intersubjective nature of CA and its dependence on shared norms, values, and interpretive frameworks. In this sense, communication is not merely a vehicle of transmission but a constitutive process that actively shapes social reality (Craig, 1999; Manning, 2014).

Building on these insights, this study adopts a post-structuralist discursive perspective to further examine the role of CA in the constitution of political identity and legitimacy. Drawing on Louis Althusser (2006), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2005), as well as Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1998), political identity is conceptualized here as relational, unstable, and discursively produced within fields of symbolic power. Within this framework, CA is not necessarily deceptive; rather, it functions as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion, classification, and boundary-drawing that contributes to the formation of political subjectivity. As Michel Foucault (1982, p. 781) suggests, power operates by categorizing individuals and attaching them to particular identities, thereby shaping what can be seen, said, and recognized within a given discursive order. Rather than treating CA as a deviation from democratic norms, this approach allows us to consider it as a recurrent communicative practice observable across different political contexts, albeit with varying intensity and consequences. In both democratic and authoritarian settings, CA contributes to processes of boundary-drawing, identity construction, and the reinforcement of normative hierarchies. However, in contexts characterized by weaker institutionalization and limited pluralism, these processes may become more visible and less contested, as fewer alternative discourses are available to challenge dominant representations.

Insights from Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of distinction and symbolic power (1984) are particularly useful for specifying these mechanisms. Processes of classification and stigmatization structure social hierarchies by defining what is perceived as legitimate, respectable, or deviant. In this sense, CA can be understood as a practice that attaches negative symbolic capital to specific actors, thereby reinforcing distinctions between the acceptable and the unacceptable. At the same time, Bourdieu's later work (1998) on the weakening of institutional autonomy in the fields of politics and media helps to explain why such symbolic struggles increasingly take personalized and moralized forms. As ideological contestation recedes, conflict is more likely to be articulated through evaluations of individual character, making CA a salient mechanism of symbolic differentiation.

This perspective also aligns with broader sociocultural and structural approaches to CA, which emphasize its embeddedness in networks of social interaction and power. As Moore et al. (2025) note, CA can function as a tool of domination that enables elites to preserve the status quo, enforce normative expectations, and maintain authority. Extending this line of reasoning, Asef Bayat (2007) demonstrates how forms of political

legitimacy can become normalized through repetition, everyday practices, and alignment with widely shared moral codes, even in the absence of coherent ideological projects. This insight underscores that legitimacy is not simply imposed but reproduced through familiar and culturally resonant discursive patterns.

Media play a central role in these processes. In line with the constitutive approach to communication, media are understood not merely as channels of information or instruments of persuasion, but as sites where social reality is actively constructed and negotiated (Craig, 1999; Manning, 2014). Recent communication scholarship further conceptualizes character assassination as a communicative mechanism of symbolic exclusion and political meaning-making within contemporary media environments (Berti & Loner, 2023). In authoritarian and weakly pluralistic media environments, media discourse organizes perception, establishes interpretive frames, and delineates the boundaries of the sayable and the legitimate. In this sense, media participate in the articulation and stabilization of hegemonic meanings, particularly where alternative narratives are marginalized and discursive competition is limited.

Methodologically, this study draws on Jason Glynos and David Howarth's (2007) Logics of Critical Explanation framework, which provides a framework for analyzing how hegemonic meanings are constructed, stabilized, and contested in discourse. This approach enables us to examine legitimacy not as a fixed institutional condition, but as an ongoing discursive accomplishment, produced through practices of articulation, exclusion, and normalization.

Taken together, this theoretical framework allows us to approach character assassination not only as an attack on individual reputation but as a discursive practice through which political identities, hierarchies, and forms of legitimacy are reproduced. Representations of political figures thus function as sites of symbolic struggle, where audiences are interpellated into particular normative orders and systems of meaning (Althusser, 2006). Given this perspective, the present study investigates how gendered character assassination in contemporary Russian media operates as a discursive mechanism that organizes perception, reinforces normative hierarchies, and delineates the symbolic boundaries of political subjectivity in an authoritarian context.

GENDER AND POLITICAL FEMININITY IN RUSSIAN AUTHORITARIAN DISCOURSE

Scholarship on gender and authoritarianism in Russia remains heterogeneous; yet, most contributions emphasize the close relationship between gender norms and regime legitimation, particularly in the context of Russia's "conservative turn" after 2011–2012. While some scholars interpret this shift as a substantive ideological realignment following the crisis of Russia's post-Soviet neoliberal order (Bluhm & Brand, 2018; Doğangün, 2020), others conceptualize conservatism as a strategic and internally contradictory project aimed at depoliticization, domestic legitimation, and international positioning

(Temkina, 2020; Zhavoronkov, 2021). Within this configuration, gender became a particularly important symbolic domain through which political authority and social order could be articulated. Research demonstrates that conservative actors in Russia – including political elites, religious institutions, intellectuals, NGOs, and media networks – collectively produce discursive frameworks organized around notions of natural order, heteronormativity, patriotism, and the strong state (Bluhm & Varga, 2019; Laruelle, 2017). A substantial body of scholarship further shows that gender in Russia is increasingly constructed in opposition to the liberal and allegedly morally deficient West (Gradskova, 2020). Feminist understandings of gender as socially constructed are frequently rejected in favor of essentialist and heteronormative models centered on motherhood, emotional restraint, and domesticity (Bluhm & Brand, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). As Doğangün (2020, p. 269) argues, this discourse reinforces a patriarchal “sexual division of labor,” while Zhurzhenko (2018) highlights the legitimizing role of aggressive political masculinity, expressed through anti-liberal rhetoric, restrictive emotionality, and explicitly sexist communication practices.

At the same time, recent scholarship complicates interpretations of Russia's conservative turn by emphasizing the hybrid character of its ideological landscape. Rather than representing a coherent return to traditionalism, Russian authoritarian discourse frequently combines conservative moral rhetoric with neoliberal forms of self-governance, self-management, and consumer identity. Schwenck (2023) conceptualizes contemporary Russian authoritarianism as grounded in neoliberal logics of self-sufficiency and competitiveness, even as it defends civilizational specific notions of tradition. In this configuration, gender roles and masculinities become key resources for legitimizing political authority. Similarly, Salmenniemi and Adamson (2015) demonstrate how neoliberal self-help culture merges with neo-traditionalist ideals, producing a distinctly Russian form of post-feminism in which romantic heterosexual fulfillment and consumer femininity coexist with conservative gender expectations.

These tensions are particularly visible in the sphere of biopolitical governance. Makarychev and Yatsyk (2015) conceptualize contemporary Russian conservatism as a form of “biopolitical conservatism,” in which political loyalty is cultivated through normative expectations regarding gender, morality, and cultural belonging. In this framework, the population is increasingly treated as both a moral and biological resource, while everyday practices become securitized and politically regulated. Kalinina's (2017) analysis of patriotic fashion further demonstrates how hegemonic masculinities and femininities are reproduced through visual and consumer culture. Her study shows how patriotic aesthetics translate nationalist and imperial vocabularies into embodied forms of femininity centered on beauty, emotional compliance, heterosexuality, and reproduction. Public selfhood becomes acceptable insofar as it remains compatible with normative expectations of attractiveness, loyalty, and depoliticized femininity.

As discussed above, scholarship on Russia's conservative turn remains divided. Some scholars interpret it as a substantive ideological realignment centered on family values and a heteronormative social order, whereas others conceptualize it as a reactive and internally

contradictory assemblage combining authoritarian statecraft, neoliberal self-governance, and moralizing discourse under conditions of political uncertainty. While these approaches differ in their interpretation of contemporary Russian conservatism, they collectively suggest that political femininity in Russia is constituted through contested discursive boundaries that regulate which forms of female visibility, emotionality, and authority are perceived as legitimate. However, less attention has been paid to how these normative frameworks are articulated through representations of foreign female political figures in authoritarian media discourse. Western women politicians may become particularly useful symbolic targets because they condense several anxieties simultaneously – liberal feminism, racial diversity, emotional expressiveness, and alternative models of political leadership. In this context, representations of Kamala Harris offer an opportunity to examine how Russian media discourse negotiates the symbolic boundaries of acceptable political femininity and political subjectivity. Against this theoretical and empirical background, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How are representations of Kamala Harris mobilized within contemporary Russian media discourse?

RQ2: What do these representations reveal about the discursive construction of political subjectivity, legitimacy, and gendered authority?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Corpus Selection

We collected data using the Russian search engine Yandex and the keyword “Камала Харрис” (“Kamala Harris”). The selected period spanned September–November 2024, covering the most intensive phase of Harris’s visibility in Russian media during the 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign. Rather than collecting short news updates, we selected analytical, commentary, and feature-oriented materials that offered extended portrayals of Harris and attempted to construct coherent narratives around her political and personal identity. The purpose of this selection strategy was to examine how gendered political subjectivity is narratively organized through recurring discursive patterns rather than through isolated statements or episodic news coverage.

The corpus included both written articles and televised broadcasts. However, video materials were analyzed primarily through their verbal and narrative dimensions rather than through multimodal or visual semiotic analysis. Broadcast segments were treated as discursive texts and examined through transcription, rhetorical framing, and thematic interpretation. Visual elements, gestures, and cinematographic techniques were not systematically coded, as they were not central to the research questions. The final corpus included materials from the following media sectors: state-aligned television platforms, mass-market tabloids and infotainment outlets, business-oriented media, and women’s lifestyle media (see Table 1). These media types represented distinct discursive registers and audience orientations within the Russian media ecosystem.

Table 1. Overview of Media Outlets Included in the Corpus

Type	Orientation/Audience	Material Type
<i>Media Outlet</i>		
<i>SMOTRIM</i>		
State television platform	State-aligned mass audience	Video broadcasts
<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>		
Popular tabloid	Mass audience	Articles
<i>Moskovsky Komsomolets</i>		
Popular newspaper/tabloid	Mass audience	Articles
<i>Dzen</i>		
Infotainment platform	Broad online audience	Blog-style content/articles
<i>24SMI</i>		
Entertainment/news aggregator	Mass audience	Articles
<i>RBK</i>		
Business media	Urban/professional audience	Analytical articles
<i>Kommersant</i>		
Business newspaper	Professional/elite audience	Articles
<i>Vzglyad</i>		
Ideological/business-oriented outlet	Conservative-oriented audience	Articles/video
<i>Woman.ru</i>		
Lifestyle media	Female middle-class audience	Feature articles

Federal television and mass-market online media formed the primary field of symbolic exposure, frequently relying on emotionalization, ridicule, personalization, and moralization. By contrast, business-oriented outlets tended to adopt a more restrained and technocratic tone. However, this apparent neutrality itself functioned discursively by limiting political interpretation and reducing political subjectivity to procedural or managerial categories. These distinctions reflect broader sociocultural divisions within the Russian media environment, particularly between metropolitan middle-class audiences and more ideologically homogeneous mass audiences.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was qualitative and discourse-oriented rather than statistical. During the analytical process, it became evident that different media sectors reproduced recurring discursive patterns that, despite stylistic variation, shared broader hegemonic assumptions concerning gender, legitimacy, emotionality, and political competence. Drawing on Glynos and Howarth’s (2007) framework, the analysis focused on three dimensions of discursive logic: social logics, political logics, and phantasmatic logics.

First, social logics referred to normalized assumptions and routinized representations underpinning portrayals of Kamala Harris. These included the normalization of femininity

through appearance and affect, assumptions linking female political success to proximity to powerful men, and the reduction of political identity to consumer or lifestyle markers.

Second, political logics concerned the construction and stabilization of hegemonic meanings. These included chains of equivalence linking femininity with emotionality, incompetence, or inauthenticity; the displacement of political agency into private life; and the systematic marginalization of Harris’s policy positions and institutional role.

Finally, phantasmatic logics referred to the affective structures through which these representations became emotionally resonant and culturally persuasive. These included fantasies of female overreach, pleasure derived from ridicule and scandal, and idealized constructions of “normal” femininity centered on domesticity, attractiveness, and emotional compliance.

CODING PROCEDURE AND CATEGORIES

The analysis included both textual and transcribed broadcast materials. Rather than aiming for statistical intercoder reliability, the coding process sought to identify recurring discursive patterns, symbolic oppositions, and hegemonic meaning structures across the corpus.

Five primary coding categories emerged during the analytical process (see Table 2):

Table 2. Primary Coding Categories and Illustrative Examples

Main Category	Illustrative Subcategories	Example
Gendered depoliticization	Focus on appearance; marginalization of policy	“carefully selects her outfit”
Moralizing intimacy	Sexualization; intimacy as political capital	“into politics through the bedroom”
Affective economies	Ridicule; emotional framing	“laughing Kamala”
Neoliberal rationalities and self-governance	Meritocracy; personal resilience	“iron lady” / “self-made success”
Masquerade of neutrality	Technocratic depoliticization	Procedural biographical framing

Gendered depoliticization included portrayals centered on clothing, appearance, romantic relationships, and the exclusion of political substance. Moralizing intimacy referred to narratives connecting political advancement to sexuality, seduction, or emotional dependency. Affective economies captured sensationalism, ridicule, and emotionally charged framing practices. The category of neoliberal rationalities and self-governance referred to representations emphasizing personal efficiency, resilience, self-management, and individualized success while marginalizing structural or ideological

dimensions of politics. Finally, masquerades of neutrality referred to formally objective or technocratic modes of reporting that nonetheless reproduced gendered exclusions through omission and trivialization.

FRAMING THE FOREIGN FEMALE POLITICIAN: DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN RUSSIAN MEDIA TELEVISION AND THE GENDERED GRAMMAR OF POLITICAL DELGITIMIZATION

One of the most revealing aspects of Kamala Harris's portrayal in Russian state-aligned media is the near-complete absence of a politically meaningful public sphere in the discursive grammar used to construct her image. Instead of addressing political programs, ideological differences, or institutional debates, the coverage displaces political content with narratives rooted in personal life, gendered affect, and interpersonal dynamics, a pattern consistent with established research on character assassination and ad hominem attacks in political communication (Benoit, 2019). This discursive substitution serves as a central mechanism of depoliticization through personalization, especially when applied to women in politics.

A striking example of this is the only publicly recorded comment made by President Vladimir Putin regarding Kamala Harris, which focused exclusively on her "infectious and expressive" laughter. As Putin noted, "She laughs so infectiously and expressively that it shows she's doing just fine."¹ This statement, while seemingly innocuous, carries significant gendered connotations. In the Russian cultural context, particularly in its patriarchal variants, a woman's laughter is often framed as a marker of light-mindedness, immaturity, or sexual availability. Thus, this is not a neutral observation, especially coming from the head of state. His reference to Harris's laugh is not an evaluation of political performance, but on her affect, her spontaneity, emotionality, and "feminine" nature.

Russian television, particularly the *SMOTRIM* platform,² which aggregates content from federal channels, reinforced and expanded this framing through its most prominent political commentator, Dmitry Kiselyov. In several broadcasts, most notably on September 1, 2024 and October 18, 2024, Kiselyov amplified gendered deligitimization by presenting Harris not as a political actor, but as an absurd spectacle. In one episode, he described Harris as "a younger mare" replacing the "old horse" (*Biden*) and went on to say: "The only thing she really knows how to do is bray... and if there's one thing she truly understands, it's LGBT topics, gender change, and other perversions that are still trending in the U.S. She can talk about them at length and with apparent seriousness, as if the fate of America truly depends on defending deviants."³

¹ https://www.rbc.ru/politics/05/09/2024/66d9679c9a79470bce98ffcb?ysclid=moy3i660vo659644830&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fya.ru%2F

² <https://smotrim.ru>

³ <https://smotrim.ru/video/2858775>; <https://smotrim.ru/article/4132519>

Such rhetoric strips Harris of any political subjectivity, reducing her presence to a grotesque caricature. Kiselyov's coverage consistently juxtaposes mockery of Harris with overtly favorable portrayals of Donald Trump, repeating Republican talking points without context or critical engagement. In the same report, *SMOTRIM* devoted considerable attention to Harris's fashion choices, with an announcer teaser stating: "Kamala Harris carefully selects her outfit for the first debate with Trump." The choice of the word "narjad" (outfit) in Russian immediately positions Harris not as a serious political participant, but as a woman preoccupied with appearance. The entire segment shifted from substance to style, focusing on Hollywood stylists and the designers who dress her, thereby relocating Harris from the domain of politics into that of fashion, femininity, and objecthood.

The October 18 broadcast further exemplifies this tendency. It did not address the content or dynamics of Harris's televised interview with Fox News. Instead, it fused conspiracy-style narration with pseudo-analysis. The commentator critiqued the interviewer's behavior as overly aggressive, suggesting that "she would have drowned herself if left alone", thus casting Harris as weak and unfit for pressure. The segment concluded with an alleged private exchange between Biden and Obama, in which they supposedly admitted that "Kamala just isn't up to the job". These fabrications simulate insider knowledge while substituting gossip for analysis, presenting interpersonal drama as the sole engine of political life in the United States. Kiselyov's narrative culminates in a clear declaration: "Politics is not Harris's business. Cooking, now that's something else... She'd do great with a cooking show. In the kitchen, she's at home, happy and harmonious – which you can't say when it comes to serious politics."⁴

This statement is not just a sexist trope; it represents a discursive abuse of democratic political practices. What was initially an attempt by the Democratic Party to humanize Harris through proximity to everyday life – including moments in the kitchen or casual settings – is reframed as an ontological mismatch between womanhood and politics. The democratic performance of accessibility is misrecognized and re-signified as triviality or even shame. In this ideological reversal the logic of representative democracy is turned into farce. Rather than acknowledging the symbolic value of visibility and informality as means of civic connection, the gesture is emptied of political intent and redeployed to affirm patriarchal hierarchies of competence and belonging. This mechanism closely aligns with what Bourdieu (1984) terms the reproduction of symbolic domination through ridicule and mockery – a subtle yet potent strategy for enforcing conformity to socially accepted roles and discrediting identities that deviate from hegemonic norms (pp. 235-240). Kamala Harris, as a Black and South Asian woman in one of the highest offices within a predominantly white, male-dominated symbolic order, represents such a transgressive figure (Laclau, 2005, p. 228). Although Harris is not a populist actor in the sense of Laclau's theory, she acquires a transgressive function within Russian media discourse. Her political subjectivity fundamentally disrupts the normative image of legitimate leadership – white, male, and aligned with domestic conservatism. In this context, the Russian regime

⁴ <https://smotrim.ru/article/4132519>

enacts a populist logic à la Laclau: constructing Harris as a deviant “Other” against which a normative collective identity can be defined and reaffirmed. In both American and Russian contexts, Harris’s presence unsettles hegemonic assumptions about who can embody political authority. But while in democratic systems such contestations may provoke debate, in the Russian authoritarian discourse they are resolved through symbolic neutralization.

Transgressive identities are not engaged with; they are trivialized, aestheticized, or mocked until they fall outside the bounds of political relevance. In this symbolic regime, the public sphere is not a space for pluralism or contestation, but a managed stage where visibility is tightly controlled. Through gendered strategies of ridicule and affective framing, figures like Harris are recast not as political actors, but as spectacles. Politics becomes not a matter of institutional legitimacy or civic participation, but a performance of conformity where only certain bodies and voices are granted the authority to speak as legitimate political subjects.

DEPOLITICIZATION THROUGH SEXUALIZATION, MOCKERY, AND INTIMATE CAPITAL

The representation of Kamala Harris in Russian mass media targeting broad audiences, such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, and especially the infotainment platform *Yandex.Dzen*⁵ – relies on recurring discursive strategies that systematically strip her of political agency. These include sexualization, focus on appearance and romantic entanglements, and a repeated narrative that attributes her political ascent not to institutional achievement but to intimate relationships with influential men.

One of the most common frames reduces Harris to a collection of accessories and bodily traits. Articles highlight her shoes, laughter, or “playfulness,” describing, for instance, how she “prefers sneakers, especially Chuck Taylors with slogans like Stop Hate or I Love Kamala.”⁶ In these accounts, political substance disappears beneath a focus on aesthetic and emotional markers. Her image is presented as ornamental rather than strategic, rendering her political identity as indistinguishable from the objects she wears. A recurring mechanism of trivialization involves framing Harris’s political ascent through narratives of intimacy, seduction, and dependence on powerful men. *Dzen* articles, in particular, recycle fantasies of Harris’s supposed past as a “high-class escort” in Hollywood and her calculated relationships with powerful men such as Willie Brown and Barack Obama. One sensationalist article mockingly suggests that after her “wild youth,” Harris advanced her career “by openly flirting with Obama” and later “going down the same road with Biden.”⁷ This depiction is not isolated: across multiple platforms, Harris’s political trajectory is framed as a result of seduction, not of competence.

⁵ <https://dzen.ru/a/ZxQf5X13kiEDdzvt>

⁶ <https://24smi.org/article/368518-predki-rabovladeltsy-otsutstvие-detei-i-roman-s-zh.html>

⁷ <https://dzen.ru/video/watch/66a13bb4f11d201c9275e789?sid=80881465713666522>

Such portrayals enforce a hegemonic gender logic where women are seen as bodies, not subjects; as distractions, not decision-makers. Harris is not attacked for what she represents politically – but for her deviation from the gendered norm: a woman of color in power becomes the perfect target for ridicule, sexualization, and re-domestication through mockery. What makes these narratives particular is their pseudo-analytic tone. They do not present themselves as satire but masquerade as investigative journalism or social commentary, thereby legitimizing their symbolic violence. Reader comments often mirror and reinforce these frames, expressing contempt for women in politics and reasserting the belief that political advancement is a function of biology and seduction. In this context, Kamala Harris becomes a symbolic figure onto whom broader anxieties about gender, power, and national identity are projected. Her image is not engaged with politically but instead neutralized through a cultural script that reduces female authority to scandal, fashion, and desire. These narratives do not merely misinform; they produce a discursive effect that reaffirms a normative worldview in which women's political subjectivity remains unintelligible outside patriarchal codes.

One of the most persistent frames applied to Harris is the idea that her private life is her main political asset. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Moskovsky Komsomolets* depict her rise in politics as a result of “support from powerful men,” “gifts,” and “romantic affairs”: “Brown promoted Harris and supported her financially. He even gifted his lover a brand-new BMW.” “Into politics through the bedroom... After a disgraceful story, she found female happiness.”⁸ Notably, Harris's relationship with her husband is framed as *female happiness*, which appeals to conservative gender structures and effectively replaces a political career with a narrative of a woman being *normalized through marriage*.

These narratives resonate with the concept of postfeminist domestication (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015), where self-work through femininity, sexuality, and personal relationships becomes the meritocratic basis of female success: “Labour as a key trope through which post-feminism is domesticated... to become ‘valuable subjects’” (p. 88). Salmenniemi and Adamson (2015) showed how meritocratic logic frames gender relations in Russia, where “sense is made of intimate relationships using the market logic of capital and exchange” (p. 88). A quote from popular Russian self-help literature offers a representative view of postfeminist gender meritocracy in Russia: “If your man gets everything and more in bed, he will give you the love you dream of. Remember, the surest way to a man's heart is through his pants... A real woman gives him all of herself, without asking for anything in return – and ends up getting everything” (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015, p. 100). As the authors point out, love is not seen as an emotional sphere but as a form of economic capital, a kind of investment that requires returns.

⁸ <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2024/07/27/v-politiku-cherez-postel-chto-tait-lichnaya-zhizn-kandidata-v-prezidenty-ssha-kamaly-kharris.html>

DEPOLITICIZED COMPETENCE AND GENDERED RATIONALITY: THE BUSINESS MEDIA GAZE ON KAMALA HARRIS

While Russia's most significant business-oriented media, such as *RBC* or *Kommersant*, provided only sparse and formal coverage of Kamala Harris – limited mostly to routine biographical information – the more ideologically charged platforms, including popular tabloids (*MK*, *KP*, *Dzen*), quasi-political blogs (*Vzglyad-Delovaya Gazeta*), and television outlets like *Smotrim*, produced a much broader and more emotionally loaded narrative around her figure. This asymmetry does not reflect editorial independence or market rationality on the part of business media, but rather different roles within Russia's tightly controlled media ecosystem. Business outlets, though not directly engaged in propagandistic mobilization, operate under the logic of strategic silence. Their function is to maintain a façade of neutrality and professionalism for elite audiences, often international or corporate, and thus avoid the overt political personalization or affective framing that dominates tabloid coverage (Tymbay, 2024).

However, this neutrality itself serves a political function: it delineates what is considered worthy of serious institutional attention and what is relegated to the realm of spectacle and symbolic degradation. This discursive split illustrates how depoliticization works differently across media sectors. In business media, it takes the form of omission or procedural detachment. In mass-market and state-aligned media, it takes the form of moralized saturation, where a female political figure is reduced to affect, domesticity, or deviation. In both cases, however, the effect is the same: the structural disqualification of a non-conforming political subject from the sphere of legitimate institutional authority.

While most Russian business-oriented outlets, such as *RBC* or *Kommersant*, maintained a low-profile, depersonalized coverage of Kamala Harris, largely limited to obligatory electoral updates or biographical summaries, one notable exception was *Vzglyad-Delovaya Gazeta*. Despite its formal classification as a business publication, *Vzglyad-Delovaya Gazeta* frequently produces content that blends economic commentary with ideological alignment, especially through its affiliated video programming. In the October 27, 2024, segment devoted to Kamala Harris, the host openly questioned her political viability, claiming she had failed to “arouse” her electorate – drawing not only on the sexualized undertones of the term, but also on the recurrent phrase “laughing Kamala,” used mockingly to discredit her seriousness. One clip shows her laughing “out of place” (timestamp 06:21), reinforcing this caricature.⁹

A distinctive feature of the report is its fully economized framing of electoral motivation: the speaker argues that voters should support Trump “if they care about specific problems,” meaning economic ones¹⁰. Trump's perceived competence in dealing with “major economic figures” is contrasted with Harris's background as “just a former prosecutor.” The phrase “specific problems” functions as a semantic gatekeeper, recognizing only economic

⁹ <https://vz.ru/video/2024/10/27/1294473.html>

¹⁰ <https://vz.ru/video/2024/10/27/1294473.html>

concerns as legitimate, thus systematically excluding moral, racial, or gendered dimensions of politics. The frame constructs a symbolic alliance between economic rationality and masculinity – implicitly delegitimizing Harris’s candidacy not by direct ideological attack, but through an epistemic narrowing of what counts as political relevance. This episode illustrates a broader mechanism of symbolic exclusion that is less about misinformation than about discursive minimization. Even within the business press – often assumed to be more neutral or technocratic – the gendered delegitimization of Harris operated through frames of economic competence, emotional control, and symbolic masculinity. The effect is not overt propaganda but a structural reinforcement of who is seen as a “proper” political actor in the public sphere. Here, the insights of Oushakine (2007) become particularly relevant. In his analysis of post-Soviet cultural production, Oushakine argued that contemporary Russia lacks stable symbolic resources for representing new gender roles. Instead of producing alternative gender imaginaries, public culture increasingly organizes gender through logics of consumption and symbolic visibility: men appear as consumers and evaluators, while women become objects of display whose public value is tied to attractiveness and symbolic availability. This symbolic fusion of the economic and the sexual forms the very foundation of the gendered public sphere in contemporary Russian authoritarianism. As seen in the *Vzglyad-Delovaya Gazeta* report, even seemingly neutral terms like “Kamala failed to excite her electorate” signal a return to a biopolitical understanding of female presence: a woman either “arouses” or fails, and her political relevance is evaluated through the affective responses she triggers, not the programs she proposes. Thus, the character assassination of Kamala Harris is not just rhetorical violence but discursive annihilation: an obliteration of political autonomy and civic legitimacy. Politics, in this framework, is no longer a realm of values, debate, or collective will – it is a spectacle of commodified intimacy, where consumerism and sexism merge to define who belongs and who does not.

DEPOLITICIZED POWER: GENDERED INDIVIDUALIZATION IN THE REPRESENTATION OF KAMALA HARRIS

A notable example of how gendered and individualized frames are deployed in semi-mainstream Russian media can be found in the women’s lifestyle platform Woman.ru, a site geared toward a middle-class female readership.¹¹ In its article titled “A Village Daughter, Childless Stepmother, Iron Lady: Who Is Kamala Harris, Who Might Replace Joe Biden?”, the publication constructs a profile of Harris that is simultaneously sympathetic and depoliticizing through practices of trivialization, domestication, and gendered personalization.

On the one hand, the piece avoids the overt sexual insinuations that often accompany depictions of Harris in other Russian media. Although her past relationships are detailed, the article refrains from linking them directly to her career progression – a departure from

¹¹ <https://www.woman.ru/stars/doch-derevni-bezdetnaya-machekha-zheleznaya-ledi-kto-takaya-kamala-kharris-kotora-ya-mozhet-zanyat-mesto-dzho-baidena-id552917/>

the dominant frame that attributes Harris's rise to her connections with powerful men. Instead, Woman.ru highlights Harris's "progressiveness" and describes her as someone who "was never a typical Indian woman who places home and family first." Her image as a "strong," "iron-willed" woman is presented without irony and is not problematized within the article's value structure. Yet this seemingly affirmative framing coexists with a complete omission of Harris's political stances, legislative record, or institutional role within the Democratic Party. Instead of political explanation, the article offers a narrative centered on interpersonal relationships, most notably attributing Harris's lack of success during the Democratic primaries to a "quarrel with her sister," who had helped manage her campaign. In this way, political causality is translated into a schema of emotional and familial dysfunction. Political identity becomes tied less to ideological positioning than to interpersonal management and affective performance.

This mode of representation differs stylistically from the openly moralizing and sexualized coverage typical of tabloids or state television, yet it similarly limits Harris's political subjectivity by framing political success primarily through the language of personal resilience, emotional competence, and private relationships. Rather than directly attacking Harris, the article individualizes and trivializes her political role, transforming institutional politics into a narrative of personal self-management and affective balance.

DISCUSSION: GENDERED DEPOLITICIZATION AND HYBRID AUTHORITARIAN DISCOURSE

The findings demonstrate that representations of Kamala Harris in Russian media discourse operate through recurring practices of gendered depoliticization. Across media sectors, Harris was rarely constructed as an ideological or institutional political actor. Instead, her visibility was displaced into registers of affect, domesticity, sexuality, appearance, and interpersonal relations. This directly addresses our research questions by showing how representations of a Western female political figure become a site through which political legitimacy, femininity, and political subjectivity are discursively constructed within contemporary Russian authoritarian discourse. Importantly, these representations varied in style across media sectors. State television and mass-market tabloids relied on ridicule, emotional caricature, and sexualization, while business-oriented and lifestyle media adopted more restrained and individualized forms of depoliticization. However, both modes produced similar effects: they reinforced symbolic boundaries of political legitimacy by coding authority through implicitly masculine norms of rationality and institutional competence, while associating femininity with affect, intimacy, and spectacle.

Taken together, the findings suggest that representations of Harris did not simply marginalize a political figure, but helped articulate broader discursive boundaries of legitimate political authority in contemporary Russian media discourse. These findings

support sociocultural approaches to character assassination, which conceptualize media attacks not simply as isolated rhetorical acts but as symbolic processes through which hegemonic norms and identities are reproduced (Samoilenko, 2021). Rather than functioning primarily as electoral persuasion or misinformation, character assassination in this context operated as a discursive mechanism for stabilizing normative hierarchies of gender and political authority.

The findings also complicate interpretations of Russia's so-called "conservative turn." While some scholarship interprets contemporary Russian conservatism as a coherent ideological realignment centered on traditional values, our analysis aligns more closely with approaches emphasizing hybridity, strategic adaptation, and ideological inconsistency (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Schwenck, 2023). The representations analyzed in this study suggest that authoritarian gender discourse in Russia does not simply reject neoliberal forms of subjectivity but selectively incorporates ideals of self-management, emotional control, individual resilience, and personalized success. Harris is not criticized primarily for her ideological positions, but for allegedly failing to embody culturally acceptable forms of femininity and emotional control. This interpretation also resonates with Novitskaya et al. (2023), who argue that many supposedly "traditional" values in contemporary Russian discourse reflect residual Soviet norms and adaptive symbolic practices rather than a newly consolidated conservative ideology. From this perspective, authoritarian femininity appears less as a coherent ideological doctrine than as a flexible assemblage combining patriarchal gender expectations, postfeminist individualization, and authoritarian symbolic governance. The findings further support Kalinina's (2017) argument that contemporary Russian biopolitical culture increasingly organizes public femininity around emotional compliance, attractiveness, and symbolic loyalty. Harris's political subjectivity repeatedly became intelligible only when translated into categories of intimacy, domesticity, sexuality, or consumption. Her representation therefore illustrates how authoritarian discourse regulates the symbolic boundaries of acceptable female political visibility.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused primarily on mainstream and state-aligned Russian media and does not claim to capture the full diversity of Russian-language media discourse, including transnational or exile outlets, where representations of Harris may follow different logics. Second, the analysis concentrated on one political figure and therefore does not seek to generalize to all representations of women politicians in Russia. Rather, Kamala Harris functioned as an illustrative case through which broader discursive patterns could be examined.

Future research could compare representations of other Western women politicians to further clarify how gendered depoliticization operates across different authoritarian and hybrid political contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Kamala Harris was represented in contemporary Russian media discourse and what these representations reveal about the discursive construction of political legitimacy, femininity, and acceptable political subjectivity. Across media sectors, Harris was repeatedly constructed less as a political actor than as an affective, aestheticized, or domesticated figure whose public visibility was mediated through emotionality, sexuality, appearance, and interpersonal relations. The findings suggest that character assassination in authoritarian media environments functions not simply as electoral persuasion or misinformation, but as a broader sociocultural mechanism of symbolic ordering within a specific media and political context characterized by hybrid state-commercial logics. Through recurring practices of ridicule, mockery, moralization, and affective framing, Russian media discourse reproduced symbolic boundaries concerning who may legitimately appear as a political subject.

Importantly, the analysis demonstrates that these representations cannot be reduced to a coherent conservative ideology alone. These findings indicate a hybrid assemblage of authoritarian normativity, patriarchal gender expectations, postfeminist individualization, and residual Soviet moral frameworks as they are articulated within the analyzed media representations. Within this configuration, female political agency becomes symbolically legitimate only insofar as it remains compatible with culturally normalized forms of emotional restraint, attractiveness, domesticity, and individualized self-management. Kamala Harris therefore became significant not primarily as a geopolitical adversary, but as a symbolic figure through which anxieties surrounding gender, authority, and political legitimacy could be negotiated within contemporary Russian discourse. The study therefore suggests that character assassination in authoritarian media environments may function not only through discrediting political opponents, but also through regulating the symbolic conditions under which political authority, legitimacy, and gendered political subjectivity become publicly intelligible.

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KAMALA HARRIS U RUSKIM MEDIJIMA: RODNO OBILJEŽENO UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE I DELEGITIMIZACIJA POLITIČKE ŽENSTVENOSTI U AUTORITARNOM DISKURSU

Oleg Kashirskikh :: Katerina Tsetsura

SAŽETAK U ovom se članku analiziraju prikazi Kamale Harris u ruskim medijima tijekom predsjedničke kampanje u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama 2024. godine kako bi se istražio način na koji se uništava reputacija u autoritarnim kontekstima. Oslanjajući se na sociokulturne pristupe uništavanju reputacije i poststrukturalističku teoriju diskursa, studija konceptualizira napade na reputaciju ne samo kao strategije narušavanja ugleda nego i kao diskurzivne prakse kojima se reproduciraju normativne hijerarhije roda i političke legitimnosti. Analiza pokazuje da se Harris prikazuje kroz stereotipne obrasce emocionalnosti, vezanosti uz privatnu i obiteljsku sferu te personalizirane ženstvenosti, čime se njezino političko djelovanje depolitizira. Nalazi također uslođavaju tumačenja ruskog konzervativizma, pokazujući da se prikazi Kamale Harris ne mogu svesti isključivo na koherentnu tradicionalističku ideologiju. Umjesto toga, oni odražavaju hibridan sklop autoritarne normativnosti, patrijarhalnih rodni očekivanja, postfeminističke individualizacije i preostalih sovjetskih moralnih obrazaca. U članku se tvrdi da uništavanje reputacije u autoritarnome medijskom diskursu djeluje manje kroz izravno ideološko sukobljavanje, a više putem simboličkog reguliranja legitimne političke subjektivnosti.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE, RODNO OBILJEŽENA DEPOLITIZACIJA, AUTORITARNI MEDIJSKI DISKURS, POLITIČKA ŽENSTVENOST, POLITIČKA SUBJEKTIVNOST

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