Pin-ups, strippers and centerfolds: Gendered mediation and post-socialist political culture

Nadia Kaneva
University of Denver, USA

Elza Ibroscheva
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, USA

Abstract
This article focuses on a ‘new generation’ of female politicians in Central and Eastern Europe who have emerged in the post-socialist context. These women are found in various countries and their political affiliations and agendas are diverse. However, they share a peculiar penchant for using the mass media to offer provocatively packaged public displays of their bodies in ways that relate to their political careers. These strategies of mediated self-exposure include posing for erotic magazines or using sexualized messages in various other video and print formats. In addition to drawing attention at home and abroad, these sensationalized and sexualized displays of female politicians’ bodies highlight the changing tastes and manners of post-socialist political culture. This article examines emblematic examples of female politicians’ mediated self-exposure and uses them to raise critical questions about the gendered nature of post-socialist political culture as it intersects with commercial media culture.

Keywords
Celebrity politics, commercialization, gendered mediation, political culture, post-socialism, sexualization, women politicians

Corresponding author:
Nadia Kaneva, University of Denver, 2490 S. Gaylord St., Denver, CO 80208, USA.
Email: nkaneva@du.edu
Embodying politics and the Cold War: introduction

A black-and-white photograph from 4 June 1961, shows Jacqueline Kennedy and Nina Khrushcheva at a luncheon in Vienna during a 2-day summit which ultimately deepened the rift between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Standing side by side, smiling for the camera, the first wives could hardly look more different from each other. Mrs. Kennedy is the epitome of bourgeois elegance: tall, slender, clad in a classically tailored, dark, two-piece suit, paired with three strings of pearls, white gloves and her signature pillbox hat. Comrade Khrushcheva embodies the stereotype of the Soviet peasant-worker: short, stocky, wearing a smock-like, loosely fitting, print dress and a hairdo that betrays no traces of styling or hair dye. More than a curious juxtaposition of bourgeois and proletarian esthetics, this photograph illustrates the deeply political nature of the way women’s bodies are clothed, coiffed, represented and imagined. A look at this photograph today makes evident that women’s bodies were one of the battlegrounds on which the Cold War was fought. In this article, we propose that a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, women’s bodies continue to be a site upon which the legacies of that conflict are inscribed. Furthermore, the post-communist context inflects the intersections of political culture with women’s embodied performances of femininity.

We begin with the premise that women’s bodies are not mere objects of representation by the media. Rather, as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has argued, women are socialized into being gendered subjects who use their bodies to perform femininities that are situated in specific cultural and political conditions. Our particular focus of analysis is a ‘new generation’ of young, female politicians in Central and Eastern Europe, who have emerged in the post-socialist cultural milieu. These women are found across the region and their political party affiliations and agendas vary. What they have in common is a penchant for using the media as vehicles through which to offer provocatively ‘packaged’ public displays of their bodies, enacting highly sexualized performances of femininity, and relating these performances to their political careers. We propose the term ‘strategies of mediated self-exposure’ to describe these performative acts, which include posing for erotic magazines or using sexualized visual messages in promotional and entertainment media disseminated through video, online and print formats.

This article examines several examples of female politicians’ strategies of mediated self-exposure in order to interrogate the gendered nature of post-socialist political culture as it intersects with commercial media culture. Although the selected examples are not necessarily a representation of the post-socialist political climate as a whole, they offer insights into the gendering of the political culture of transition. Ultimately, we aim to address the following questions: First, based on our reading of selected non-news media content, how do female politicians perform femininity and sexuality within post-socialist media culture? Second, how can an analysis of these performances inform our understanding of the gendered articulations of power in post-socialist politics? And lastly, how can the post-socialist case inform our broader understanding of the gendering of public culture in the age of globalized commercial media and celebrity culture?
Media portrayals of women in politics: theoretical and methodological issues

The media’s gendered representations of politics and politicians have received sustained attention in the Anglo-American academy. Gidengil and Everitt (1999) have identified three ‘phases’ in the study of women, politics and the media. The first phase includes studies concerned with the under-representation, or invisibility, of women in media texts. Gaye Tuchman’s (1978) seminal work on the ‘symbolic annihilation of women’ by the media sets the tone in this phase and continues to serve as a model for later studies (e.g. Hernandez, 1996; Spears and Seydegart, 2000). The second phase adopts a more specific focus on news coverage of female politicians and excavates different forms of media ‘bias’ or stereotyping of women (e.g. Davis, 1982; Carlin and Winfrey, 2009; Falk, 2008; Kahn, 1996). The third phase focuses on ‘gendered mediation’ – a process that is understood as ‘the more subtle, but arguably more insidious, form of bias that arises when conventional political frames are applied to female politicians’ (Gidengil and Everitt, 1999: 49). Burke and Mazzarella (2008) further define gendered mediation as ‘a type of framing that results when journalists use language differently depending on the sex of an individual’ (p. 398).

The gendered mediation thesis holds that political media coverage reflects ‘men’s traditional dominance of political life’ (Gidengil and Everitt, 1999: 49) and, in turn, implies that women in politics are atypical and their very presence needs to be softened and minimized, or ‘trivialized’ in Tuchman’s terminology. Gendered mediation is accomplished through reporters’ use of particular language or visuals, and female politicians are often complicit in trivializing themselves by discussing such topics as family, recipes or beauty routines (Ross, 2002; Ross and Sreberny, 2000). Broadly speaking, most analyses of gendered mediation are rooted in framing theory. The gendered nature of news coverage has also been related to gendered newsroom cultures (North, 2009), the gender of news-workers and presenters (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010) and the gendered structures of media production more broadly (Van Zoonen, 1994). In short, research on the gendered mediation of politics has shown that the news does not simply reflect the masculine-dominated nature of political life, but is also a factor in perpetuating masculine assumptions about politics and politicians (Rakow and Kranich, 1991; Sreberny and Van Zoonen, 2000).

Many studies on gendered mediation privilege news content and news production as main sites of investigation. Scholars frequently adopt an even narrower focus, analyzing news coverage around particular elections and electoral campaigns, often in specific national contexts (e.g. Carlin and Winfrey, 2009; Falk, 2008). The emphasis on news is frequently explained through a combination of feminist concerns about gender equality and normative beliefs about the role of news media in creating an informed citizenry in democratic societies. However, a primary focus on the ‘information function’ of media leaves a lot unexplored and limits the relevance of gendered mediation research for societies where democratic traditions are relatively recent, as in post-socialist Europe, or lacking altogether.

In the specific context of Central and Eastern Europe, studies of gendered mediation also tend to focus on how the news media frame female politicians (Bamburac et al.,
Indeed, much of the literature on gendered mediation tends to conceptualize female politicians as ‘objects’ of media framing, rather than as agents (i.e. ‘subjects’) who leverage media coverage strategically for their own purposes. This approach is prevalent even in research that exposes sexist and stereotypical portrayals of female politicians by the media (e.g. Carilli and Campbell, 2005; Ross, 2002; Sreberny and Van Zoonen, 2000).

The ability of female politicians to deliberately use media content toward certain ends is, in fact, examined in a strand of research that focuses on gender and political advertising campaigns (e.g. Carlson, 2007; Cwalina et al., 2000; Larson, 2001). However, this work does not connect to feminist concerns; it often treats gender as an independent variable and gives little or no attention to the cultural implications of gendered mediation. Recently, some feminist scholars have begun to look at female politicians’ efforts to manage their mediated images (e.g. Van Zoonen, 2006). However, much work remains to be done on this topic and virtually no research exists on it in relation to the post-socialist context. Finally, the relationship between entertainment media and women’s participation in political culture remains underexplored with the notable exception of Liesbet Van Zoonen’s (2000, 2006) work. This is a significant blind spot in the literature, given the strong tradition of critical research on gender and popular culture, both from a cultivation theory perspective (e.g. Gerbner and Signorielli, 1979; Signorielli, 1989) and from a cultural studies and feminist perspectives (e.g. Carter and Steiner, 2004; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008).

In light of this, this article aims to address two different gaps in the literature. On the one hand, we seek to extend the critical cultural studies perspective by drawing attention to the role of entertainment and promotional media in the gendering of political culture. Specifically, we look at how this process is unfolding in the post-socialist context. We analyze non-news content, including political campaign ads, magazine photo spreads and other forms of promotional media that are traditionally overlooked by studies of gendered mediation. Second, we suggest that in order to understand the continuing stereotyping and trivialization of female politicians in media content of any kind, it is necessary to take into account women’s own active participation in mediated performances of femininity and sexuality. We offer a reconceptualization of the relationship between media and female politicians as one of mutual manipulation, where female politicians are not merely passive ‘objects’ of framing by the media. Rather, through several emblematic examples, we aim to show how female politicians or political candidates choose to engage in sexualized strategies of mediated self-exposure, whereby they deliberately play into the media’s glut for eroticized representations of the female body in order to advance their political aspirations. Our examples are drawn from four post-socialist countries – Poland, Estonia, Romania and the Czech Republic – and were chosen because they transgress the boundaries of what is generally considered ‘appropriate’ behavior for female politicians in any cultural context. An analysis of female politicians’ strategies of mediated self-exposure may render important insights into the politics of gender and the gender of politics in post-socialist Europe.
Gender in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe: brief historical overview

One of the ideological promises of communism was that it would bring about the full emancipation of women in both public and private life. Indeed, socialist countries made significant advances in regard to women’s participation in the labor force and politics. As feminist sociologist Maxine Molyneux (1995) sums up,

Under communism there was the security afforded through a paternalistic state, and, for all its problems, full employment. A commitment to formal equality in social life gave women a presence, albeit of limited significance, in the structures of bureaucratic power. (49–50)

After the end of the Cold War, a different story about women’s emancipation began to emerge. It revealed that, while women in socialist societies reached unprecedented levels of education and employment (two core concerns for Western feminists), they also continued to carry a ‘double burden’, shouldering most of the responsibilities for domestic work and child rearing (Corrin, 1992; Einhorn, 1993; Funk and Mueller, 1993).

Three important trends characterize the post-socialist environment in terms of its implications for women’s political participation. The first decade of transition witnessed a widespread increase in poverty in Central and Eastern Europe, with women losing ground in the labor force and being forced back into the domestic sphere (Emigh and Szelenyi, 2001). This led to a resurgence of patriarchal values and policies, which were often couched in a newly found respect for religion (Graff, 2003; Watson, 1993). To offer just one illustration, consider a recent statement by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill who described feminism as a ‘very dangerous’ phenomenon that offers women the illusion of freedom, whereas their focus should be on the home and family (quoted in Elder, 2013).

A second trend concerns the aggressive masculinization of post-socialist politics in Central and Eastern Europe with women experiencing dramatic losses in parliamentary seats across the region, as well as declining access to political power overall. As Matland and Montgomery (2003) summarize, with the first post-socialist elections ‘women’s share in national parliaments plummeted from a regional average of around 30 per cent to less than 10 per cent, in several countries below 5 per cent’ (p. 1). To be clear, women in the region were not equally represented in political structures under communism either, but their numbers in parliament were greater at the end of the communist period than they were in the two decades that followed. This trend has recently begun to reverse but there is still a long way to go.

The dominant culture of politics in the post-socialist world is currently defined by ‘strong man’ politicians, such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin, Hungary’s Victor Orban, the Czech Republic’s Milos Zeman and others who have made numerous public statements revealing unapologetic sexism. To give just one example, in 2010, newly elected Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov responded to criticisms about the lack of women in his cabinet with fake concern, stating: ‘There’s no one to look at during cabinet sessions: they’re all boring faces’ (quoted in Harding, 2010). Azarov then went on to...
justify this state of affairs by asserting that, ‘With all respect to women, conducting reforms is not women’s business’ (Harding, 2010). The masculinist climate of post-socialist politics may be one reason why women’s movements and activists in the region tend to avoid identifying themselves as ‘feminist’ (Marody, 1993; Sperling, 1999; Watson, 1997). In addition, women’s issues were marginalized on political agendas (Graff, 2003; Rueschemeyer, 1994). In short, a generally hostile climate for women’s participation in politics persists throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

Finally, the region has seen a rapid and pervasive commercialization of its media sphere (Kaneva and Ibroscheva, 2012; Perusko and Popovic, 2008; Stetka, 2012). This includes the wholesale adoption of Western genres and formats, such as reality TV, lifestyle magazines, tabloid newspapers and a variety of soft and hardcore pornographic products. Many authors point out that the privatized and commercially financed media, which quickly embraced Western entertainment formats, overwhelmingly portrayed women in highly sexualized and commodified ways that were unprecedented in communist times (Borenstein, 2008; Ibroscheva, 2013a; Simic, 2006; Volcic and Erjavec, 2013). In addition, these authors note that post-socialist media culture often went beyond simply copying Western media trends and took them to new extremes in their local adaptations. In short, the influx of foreign capital and media content in post-socialist media markets meant that the reinvention of post-socialist femininities occurred in relation to transnational commercial media culture.7

The cumulative effect of these trends is that the ‘subject positions’ (in Foucault’s terms) for women willing to participate in post-socialist political life have been severely constrained, at least when it comes to mainstream public discourse. In the early phase of the ‘transition’ especially, the available public roles for women changed from ‘communist worker/activist/mother’ to ‘post-communist slut/sex kitten/housewife’. Female politicians who refused to conform to these ‘new’ roles have been treated by the media as unattractive, undesirable and unfeminine (Roman, 2001). The role of the successful ‘businesswoman’ has also emerged as an alternative to the housewife (see Zhurzhenko, 2001), but it also tends to be highly sexualized in media representations. In that role, women are often portrayed as gaining independence and social power through the use of their ‘physical assets’ (Ibroscheva, 2013b; Volcic and Erjavec, 2013). We would argue that these trends represent reactions to the collapse of communism and the influx of global (i.e. Western and neoliberal) influences in the chaotic period of ‘transition’ that followed. In that sense, the trends we have outlined illustrate some of the cultural legacies of the Cold War.

Strategies of mediated self-exposure: examples from four countries

Against a backdrop of resurgent patriarchy, combined with a commercialized media sphere motivated by the constant search for profits and sensations, a new kind of female politician has emerged: one who is ready to exploit her sexuality in the service of her political aspirations.8 In this section, we describe this phenomenon and illustrate it with examples from four post-socialist countries: Poland, Estonia, Romania and the Czech Republic. We begin with Poland where in 2011, due to low representation of women in
local and national government, a quota system was instituted requiring political parties to include at least 30 percent of female candidates on election lists (Women and Journalists First, 2011). Shortly before the quota was introduced, in November 2010, a media-savvy pop singer launched a bid for city councilwoman in Warsaw’s local elections. The election posters of Katarzyna Szczolek, better known to the public by her stage name, Sara May, featured the candidate reclining on a beach, wearing a tiny bikini. The slogan underneath her tanned body touted her as: ‘Beautiful, independent, competent!’ thus unequivocally equating her physical attractiveness with her qualifications for public office. Szczolek’s unusual poster stood out even more against the snowy landscape of Warsaw in November, attracting plenty of attention from passers-by as well as local and international media. German television channel RTL produced a news segment for its tabloid-style show ‘RTL Explosiv’ on Szczolek’s controversial campaign. In the intro to the segment, the show’s host describes Szczolek mockingly as the Polish version of Angela Merkel – one without political ideas but with a much better modeling potential. Throughout the segment, Szczolek is shown wearing tightly fitting clothes that showcase her ample curves, smiling and posing seductively for the camera. When discussing her reasons for getting involved in politics she comments that ‘most women in politics are ugly and not even smart’ – a trend she wants to change. She further adds that her campaign is aimed at ‘young people’ and that, if elected, she would work for more sidewalks, bike lanes and other spaces where youth can exercise.

Szczolek’s campaign did not win her a seat on the city council, but it was cleverly engineered to generate publicity for her and, perhaps, help her career as a media and pop culture celebrity. It is notable that her election poster displays her real name above her photo, but lists a website created under her stage name (http://www.saramay.pl), thus fusing her ‘celebrity’ persona with her ‘political’ one. This was likely a carefully thought out tactic, given Szczolek’s extensive experience in the media spotlight as well as her educational background. The singer’s biography on her website states that she studied Cultural Studies at the Warsaw School of Social Psychology and wrote a Master’s thesis titled, ‘Scandal, Gossip, Stars and Celebrity’. Three years after her unsuccessful run for office, the ‘Media’ section of Sara May’s website still displays a number of videos and print articles from the coverage of her election campaign, featuring the RTL news video in the number one spot.

In 2011, another Polish candidate for office, 23-year-old Katarzyna Lenart, challenged the conventions of political campaigning even further by launching a racy campaign video on YouTube. The 30-second spot shows Lenart performing a striptease in a darkened room, with a single spotlight trained on her. She gazes straight into the camera as she removes her clothes one by one to the rhythm of seductive music. When she finally takes off her lacy pink bra, the camera fades to black and the word ‘Censored’ in red block letters appears on screen and obscures her breasts. The spot ends with the tagline, ‘You want more? Vote for SLD. Only we can do more’. Lenart’s video equates political empowerment with sexual assertiveness and titillation; she smiles and looks right into the camera, demonstrating her sexual freedom. While stripping for the camera, she is clearly in charge and enjoying herself. At the same time, the video’s visual esthetic is reminiscent of a peep show; it puts the viewer in the position of a solitary and anonymous observer with the dancing ‘candidate’ as the object of illicit fascination.
Lenart’s stunt attracted public criticism, but she defended her campaign tack, telling Gazeta Wyborcza: ‘I thought it was time to cause a stir. My campaign targets young people, and young people are only interested in controversial stuff, unfortunately’ (Political candidate in strife for striptease, 2011). Given the SLD’s dismal performance in the 2011 election (winning only 8.24% of the votes), Lenart’s tactics may have been a last-ditch attempt to gain popularity through controversy. But her decision to bet on sexual provocation only garnered her 500 votes, as well as the criticism of her own party whose spokesperson described her campaign as poorly fitting the party’s left-leaning political agenda (Political candidate in strife for striptease, 2011). Nevertheless, Lenart’s act of mediated self-exposure is notable for her unabashed equation of personal sexploitation with political empowerment. The strategies of mediated self-exposure in both Lenart’s and Szczechol’s campaign materials are very much in tune with a Western post-feminist media discourse, which, as Gill (2003) has astutely observed, ‘offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire’ (p. 104). However, the direct equation of sexual power with political power (or at least the promise of it) appears to be a uniquely post-socialist ‘innovation’.

A similar logic seems to have been behind an even more extreme case of mediated self-exposure executed by former Estonian politician Anna-Maria Galojan. In 2009, Galojan, who was 26 at the time, appeared nude in the Estonian edition of Playboy, gracing the magazine’s cover as well as several pages inside the February issue. Galojan had been active on Estonia’s political scene for several years as a member of the Estonian Reform Party’s youth branch. Between June and September 2007, she served as Director of Estonia’s European Movement, a non-profit organization, but left that post after being charged with embezzling funds equivalent to approximately 60,000 Euros. This led to a protracted legal process and her legal options were finally exhausted in 2011 when Estonia’s Supreme Court upheld Galojan’s conviction by a lower court that had sentenced her to 5 months in jail and an additional 17-month suspended sentence. To avoid serving jail time, Galojan fled to the United Kingdom where she applied for political asylum claiming that the case against her had been politically motivated and improperly conducted (Roman, 2012).10

Anna-Maria Galojan’s 2009 appearance in Playboy came in the middle of her efforts to assert her innocence and was undoubtedly a strategic decision with both political and economic implications. Her choice to stage an act of mediated self-exposure was part of an effort to influence public opinion and build on her already existing media celebrity status in Estonia. She posed for the cover of Playboy wearing nothing but long black gloves, concealing her breasts with one arm while her eyes look straight at the camera to meet the gaze of the reader head on as she smiles. The headline under her name reads: ‘The Naked Truth’, clearly referring to the scandal around her. The visual esthetic of the cover photograph is almost clinical – her fair skin and blond hair are shown against a simple black background, creating maximum contrast. This visual approach, paired with the choice of headline, construct Galojan as the object of open scrutiny as well as a sexually liberated and politically transparent subject, unafraid to ‘bare all’ both literally and figuratively. She presses this point further in an interview with The Baltic Times where she describes her decision to pose for Playboy as ‘an act to show my protest’ (Karapetyan, 2009). As in the two examples from Poland, Galojan’s strategy of mediated self-exposure

10
relies on the symbolic equation of sexual liberation with personal and political empowerment. In addition, similarly to the Polish examples, Galojan’s performance is enacted in popular media, rather than in ‘serious news’ media.

Our next two examples illustrate that mixing mediated erotica with politics is practiced not only by women on the fringes of political life. The first case involves Elena Udrea – a high-profile Romanian politician, who was Minister of Regional Development and Tourism from 2009 to 2012. In November 2011, Udrea appeared on the cover of fashion magazine *Tabu* [Taboo] wearing a tightly fitting, black rubber dress, knee-high shiny leather boots and a bleach blonde ‘Charlie’s Angels’ hairdo. In the photo, her out-stretched arms appear to support a giant globe behind her, upon which one can discern the outlines of Romania’s new tourism logo – one of Udrea’s most controversial and widely known projects as Minister of Tourism. Her name appears in large print on the cover and the headline underneath reads: ‘Parables of Power’. Similarly to the previous examples, this image of Udrea makes a visual and symbolic connection between her airbrushed sexual appeal and her political power.

Importantly, the visual composition of the cover mimics the cover of the May 2008 issue of *Vanity Fair*, which featured global pop star Madonna in a black leather bodice, striking the same pose. Indeed, the entire concept of *Tabu*’s November 2011 issue, ostensibly devoted to powerful women in world history, relied on mimicry and glam photography. The inside pages featured Udrea dressed up in various outfits intended to make her look like Cleopatra, Jackie Kennedy, Margaret Thatcher and Eva Peron. The choice of powerful women is also notable. With the exception of Thatcher, whose political credentials are indisputable, these women represent iconic figures who are better known to Western audiences for their style than their policies. This is hardly surprising given the nature of the medium – fashion magazines rarely, if ever, cover ‘real’ politics. At the same time, it is not unusual for glossy magazines in the post-socialist context to feature female politicians on their covers, but only those whose looks and public image fit the magazine’s editorial and business goals. Doru Iftime, editor-in-chief of *The One*, another Romanian glossy, explains, ‘We featured twice Ms. Udrea on the cover [of *The One*] because she is very much alike [sic] the magazine’s profile: chic, fashion-driven, controversial – she is a character that perfectly serves the commercial and advertising interests of the magazine’ (cited in Surugiu, 2012: 1932).

Udrea’s stint in *Tabu* extended her already established reputation as a Romanian media celebrity.11 She wrote about the photo shoot on her blog, drawing an explicit link between her political aspirations and her mediated self-exposure. In an entry entitled ‘Lady Power: How to Remain a Woman in Politics’ she decried her plight as a woman politician in Romania and listed the names of successful female politicians around the world as a sign that women are increasingly claiming high-level positions in politics. She then issued her political provocation: ‘I would really like to see that in Romania one of the big parties is open enough to propose a courageous and skillful woman for the most important position in the state’, implying that she would be interested in running for president (Udrea, 2011). Toward the end of the brief blog entry, she described her source of political legitimacy in the following terms: ‘I showed everyone that a woman can work 14-16 hours per day, every day, sometimes more and better than a male. And do that even in heels, and going to the hairdresser, and, especially, without turning into a man’
Udrea’s narrative clearly demonstrates the highly gendered nature of political power in the post-socialist context, where feminine and masculine styles of politics become deliberately delineated.

The fact that Udrea declares her aspirations for top political office from the pages of a fashion magazine and chooses to highlight her feminine appearance as one of her main assets is significant. It demonstrates the uniquely post-socialist blending of political ambition with glamour, sex and fashion. The case of Tabu also highlights particularly well the imitative nature of post-socialist media culture, which coopts not only media genres, but also ready-made visual tropes and icons, reinterpreting them with a local flavor. Tabu’s choice of Madonna as the ‘prototype’ for the cover in an issue on powerful women suggests that the line between celebrity, sexual provocation and political power is rather blurred in the post-socialist media environment. Lastly, this example illustrates the confluence of commercial and political interests in relation to the phenomenon we are describing.

A final example comes from the Czech Republic, where female members of the Public Affairs Party released a racy calendar just in time for national elections in 2010. Each of the months in the calendar featured a different female politician, photographed in black and white, wearing a revealing outfit and striking a provocative, pin-up pose. Marketa Reedova, a 42-year-old Prague councilwoman who appeared in the calendar, explained the idea behind its publication in the following way: ‘Women’s political influence is growing. Why not show we are women who aren’t afraid of being sexy?’ (quoted in Fairclough and Carney, 2010). Indeed, the 2010 Czech election brought an increase in the number of female members of parliament and, according to Katerina Klasnova, a.k.a. Miss January, the calendar was intended to highlight the presence of women in Czech politics. Similarly to our previous examples, this ‘tribute’ to women in politics also relies on the equation of political empowerment with sex appeal. In that sense, it celebrates women by reproducing their stereotypical trivialization and sexualization by the media, and – judging by the comments of the ‘calendar girls’ – this is done without any sense of irony. It is notable that the ‘sexy calendar’ idea is also borrowed from Western media discourses (cf. the British film Calendar Girls 2003), but its application to the realm of politics is a particular local adaptation that would be hard to imagine in the West. Interestingly, the Public Affairs Party has not fared well since 2010 due to a corruption scandal and there is no evidence that its female members advanced women’s issues on the Czech political agenda (Center-right Czech coalition dissolves itself, 2012).

Sexual liberation or self-sexploitation? Discussion and conclusions

The examples discussed above may seem lurid and distasteful, especially in comparison to the media images of high-profile female politicians in the West, such as Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel, who generally underplay their femininity and sexuality. At the same time, we would argue that while these examples do not reflect the behavior of the majority of female politicians in Eastern Europe, they capture the uniquely fraught nature of post-socialist political culture and its gendered mediation. It is significant that these examples come from four countries that are generally seen as quite different in their
cultural outlook. Poland and Romania are considered to be more conservative societies, with the Catholic Church exerting a strong influence over gender policies in Poland (Graff, 2003). Estonia and the Czech Republic, on the other hand, are viewed as having more permissive cultures, in part due to their proximity and historical ties with parts of Western Europe. Through the inclusion of examples from four different countries, we want to suggest that, despite national specificities, the strategic use of mediated self-exposure by female politicians is characteristic of post-socialist political culture overall, and it is likely rooted in shared historical experiences related to life under communism. In other words, the hyper-sexualization of mediated post-socialist femininities – including in the realm of politics – is, at least in part, a reaction against the memory of restrictive and dogmatic constructions of femininity by communist regimes. At the same time, since the end of the Cold War, a new generation has come of age – one without direct experiences or memories of the old system – for whom commercial and celebrity culture is not a novelty but the normal state of affairs. Many of the women politicians we have discussed in this article are part of that new generation and, in that regard, they represent the ascendance of commercial and mediatized models of femininity as the new norm.

In 1961, Jackie Kennedy and Nina Khrushcheva represented two categorically different ideological visions of femininity. It appears that, 25 years after the end of the Cold War, female politicians in Central and Eastern Europe have abandoned both the image of the ‘proper bourgeois wife’ and that of the ‘communist revolutionary/worker/mother’. Encouraged by profit- and sensation-driven media, some female politicians have chosen instead to employ visual tropes borrowed from Western pin-up esthetics and ‘striptease culture’ (McNair, 2002), blurring the boundaries between politics and celebrity culture in ways unparalleled in the West. Although more research is needed to assess the political significance of this phenomenon, so far it does not appear to have benefitted women’s interests or causes. Rather, female politicians’ strategies of mediated self-exposure have guaranteed them media coverage and attention, but have not led to real political gains for individual politicians or for women as a social group.

Importantly, there appears to be no irony in the way post-socialist female politicians have deployed their strategies of mediated self-exposure. In some cases, these women have sought to make bona fide political claims – with varying degrees of sophistication – while unabashedly showcasing their cleavage. All of this has occurred in the context of entertainment media, with the clear expectation that the content should both provoke and amuse. This could be interpreted as an unflattering commentary on the sorry state of political media coverage in Eastern Europe, which has been previously shown to trivialize and sensationalize women in politics (e.g. Bamburac et al., 2006; Ibroscheva and Stover, 2012). In line with this research, one might argue that in a sexist and hostile news media environment, female politicians have no recourse but to turn themselves into visual spectacles and court the entertainment media if they want their message to be heard. Another explanation for the phenomenon we have observed may be found in the highly politicized media environment in the region. Political economic research has documented that the media in post-socialist Europe are controlled by a limited number of media tycoons who are more interested in promoting partisan agendas than in fair and accurate news coverage (Stetka, 2012). In this context, online and entertainment media may present alternative avenues for less powerful political actors to be heard, provided
that they are willing to ‘put on a show’. This is precisely the strategy adopted by the women showcased in this article.

In the end, what does all this really tell us about women’s political agency in the post-socialist context? Are the women we have described courageous pioneers adapting to the new conditions and doing what it takes to have their message heard? Or are they allowing themselves to be, yet again, ‘framed’ by the media, albeit in a non-news setting? Following Gill’s (2003, 2007) critique of Western post-feminism, we would argue that performances of mediated self-exposure come at a price in the post-socialist context as well. While they claim to be celebrating their sexual liberation, post-socialist female politicians play into existing and pernicious media stereotypes, helping to reproduce and expand the sexualization of women’s bodies into the political realm. They repeatedly defend their strategies of mediated self-exposure in ways that seek to position them as ‘progressive’ and ‘empowered’ women who embrace their sexuality and want to ‘use it’ in order to advance women’s standing in politics. But that is exactly the mark of post-feminist misappropriation of the language of feminism, which, as we noted earlier, is already highly suspect in Eastern Europe. In this misappropriation, genuine empowerment and solidarity are precluded by simplistic media representations of what ‘real women’ look like – attractive, fashionable, heterosexual – as defined by global consumer culture (see McRobbie, 2008).

In this version of post-socialist women’s ‘emancipation’, the sexualized and glamorized female body is paraded as a symbol of sexual and political empowerment, implying that a woman’s right to be seen as a political subject is contingent on her willingness to perform her part as an object of sexual desire. This speaks volumes about the gendered patterns of political power in the post-socialist context more broadly. It is no coincidence that FEMEN, perhaps the most radical, global feminist group today, whose topless activists call themselves ‘sextremists’ and most of whom look like supermodels, has emerged from the post-Soviet space. While FEMEN sextremists may stand up for different causes than the ones found on the political agendas of the politicians we described in this article, we would argue that these women’s mediated performances of femininity are part of the same trend within post-socialist political culture. FEMEN is the radical counterpart to the mediated self-exposure of more ‘mainstream’ female politicians; yet both are the logical outcomes of an aggressively macho political culture, combined with the neoliberal imperatives of commercial entertainment media, and expressed through a porn-chic, post-feminist esthetic. Additional research is necessary in order to assess how our findings may inform a broader discussion of gender and celebrity politics on a global scale. However, our analysis suggests that the fusion of celebrity culture, gendered mediation and politics does not necessarily improve women’s chances at real political power.

**Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Notes**

1. Our review of the literature here is limited to English-language scholarship, including work by scholars from the Central Eastern Europe (CEE) region published in English. This is a
partial view, which may not reflect how scholars within other linguistic and cultural traditions theorize the gendered media coverage of politics.

2. These ‘phases’ are not mutually exclusive, nor are they chronologically distinct. The three approaches frequently intersect and all three continue to be used today.

3. A theoretically diverse body of literature exists on entertainment media and politics, especially in relation to news parody and political satire (e.g. Gray, 2009; Holbert, 2005; Jones, 2010; Young, 2004). However, this work has not addressed questions of gender and, more specifically, of women in politics.

4. Our interpretations presented in this essay are inevitably partial as we are both post-socialist subjects and expatriates from Eastern Europe. Our own gendered identities and lived experiences inform our analysis of the political culture of post-socialism.

5. Elsewhere we have argued that patriarchy had been alive and well during the communist period, but it was not publicly glorified for ideological reasons (Kaneva and Ibroscheva, 2013).

6. Former communist European Union (EU) member-states averaged 20 percent of female Members of Parliament (MPs) in 2012 (United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.), still short of the pre-1989 average. We acknowledge that comparing the percentages of female MPs before and after 1989 is somewhat problematic. Communist elections were hardly democratic and it has been argued that women were represented only nominally. Nevertheless, the numbers suggest an active ideological concern of communist regimes with a display of gender equality, and the obvious disappearance of women from the political stage in the post-socialist period cannot be dismissed (for more, see Matland and Montgomery, 2003).

7. This trend has also impacted performances of post-socialist masculinities, including those by politicians, as illustrated by recent research on Russia’s Vladimir Putin as ‘a celebrity and cultural icon’ (Goscilo, 2012). We cannot examine shifts in masculinities here due to space limitations, but we acknowledge the importance of understanding gender as a relational construct.

8. The trend of equating hyper-sexuality with women’s political empowerment is not unique to post-socialist societies. Italian politics present two widely known examples: Cicciolina (née Ilona Staller), a Hungarian-born porn star turned Member of Parliament in the 1980s, and the more recent case of former showgirl and model Mara Carfagna, who was appointed Minister of Equal Opportunity in 2008. While this phenomenon is observable in other countries as well, our focus here is on the significance of this trend for post-socialist political culture.

9. SLD is the Polish abbreviation used for the country’s Democratic Left Alliance party. The SLD is one of the political formations that emerged from the dissolution of the Polish United Worker’s Party (PZPR), that is, Poland’s communist party, which had been in power from 1948 to 1989. Presently, the SLD is one of several opposition parties in Poland.

10. At the time of writing, Galojan continued to reside in the United Kingdom while maintaining a media presence in Estonia, including through her publications as a correspondent for the English-language newspaper The Baltic Times. Whether or not she was indeed unjustly convicted is beyond the scope of our discussion. Rather, we are interested in Galojan’s use of mediated self-exposure as a political strategy.

11. Udrea had previously appeared in Tabu in 2008 in a high fashion photo shoot accompanied by an interview. She also appeared in another fashion magazine, The One, in 2006 and 2009 (Surugiu, 2012). However, the 2011 Tabu cover was more explicit in its overt articulation of sexual with political power.

12. We wish to thank Dr. Delia Popecu of Le Moyne College who helped with research on Elena Udrea.
13. Udrea may not be the only Romanian politician whose feminine appearance has bolstered her political presence. Roberta Anastase, the first female Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies in Romania, was also a former Miss Romania and a 1996 Miss Universe competitor. On the other hand, a number of powerful female politicians have opted to downplay their femininity in favor of a more conservative look. Examples include former General Prosecutor of Romania Laura Codruta Kovesi and Anca Boagiu, former Minister of Transportation. Notably, both Kovesi and Boagiu entered politics after successful careers in what may be seen as traditionally male careers – professional sports (basketball) and engineering, respectively. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing these examples to our attention.

14. The image of the suit-clad female politician is no less gendered and problematic (see Aday and Devitt, 2001). As Ross and Comrie (2012) also demonstrate, even in cases where female politicians adopt more conventional methods of advancing their political platforms, they are still subjected to a media scrutiny that defines them ‘first by their biology and then by their politics’ (p. 971).

15. Examples from other countries in the region also exist, but could not be included due to space limitations.

16. According to the latest data available from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1 April 2014), all but one former socialist countries report women’s representation in Parliament at 25 percent or below. The one exception is Slovenia with 33.3 percent of female representation in Parliament. Particularly troubling are the numbers in Hungary and Romania with 9.4 percent and 13.4 percent female MPs, respectively, which ranks them both significantly lower than Libya, Syria, Turkey and Afghanistan (http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm).

References


Center-right Czech coalition dissolves itself (2012) DW, 23 April. Available at: http://www.dw.de/center-right-czech-coalition-dissolves-itself/a-15903891


**Biographical notes**

Nadia Kaneva is Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Film and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver. She is the editor of *Branding Post-Communist Nations: Marketizing National Identities in the ‘New’ Europe* (Routledge, 2011), and author of multiple scholarly articles and chapters. Most recently, she guest-edited a special issue on the mediation of post-socialist femininities for the journal *Feminist Media Studies* (forthcoming in January 2015).
Elza Ibroscheva is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Mass Communications, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She is the author of *Advertising, Sex, and Post-Socialism: Women, Media, and Femininity in the Balkans* (Lexington 2013). She is also co-editor, with Maria Raicheva-Stover, of *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition* (Bloomsbury 2014). Her work has appeared in numerous journals and edited volumes.