

Will the UK media ever grow up in how they cover women in politics? The case of Ekaterina Zatuliveter shows that sexist attitudes remain pervasive

Revelations in 2010 about possible Russian spies in the west have tinges of cold-war era paranoia, and the most recent involving the parliamentary researcher of a Liberal Democrat MP have raised questions about security at the heart of government. But according to [Avery Hancock](#), these allegations and the way Ekaterina Zatuliveter has been portrayed, tell us far more about sexism in the media and in our corridors of power.



The arrest and possible deportation of Russian national Ekaterina Zatuliveter, the parliamentary research assistant to Liberal Democrat MP Mike Hancock, has created a flurry of press intrigue over her possible links to Russia's FSB spy agency. The *Sunday Times* reports that home secretary Theresa May signed the deportation order on the grounds of national security following a six-month investigation by MI5 on her activities in the House of Commons. The young woman is now being held at an immigration detention centre.

According to the [BBC](#) Ms Zatuliveter was arrested at 7am on 7 December and was told she was being deported, without any explanation of why. Through an email to the BBC she claimed: 'I am in the process of appealing against the deportation and absolutely sure I will win it (if there is justice).' Unsurprisingly few details on the case have been given by either MI5 or the Home Office. The UK Border Agency says that the secretary of state can [deport](#) anyone if it is judged to be conducive to the 'public good,' a provision that taken in its widest sense, could cover just about anyone.

The UK press has quickly tried to fill the vacuum with speculation. Mike Hancock has been a member of the Commons defence select committee for the past 11 years. He represents Portsmouth South, where the Ministry of Defence has significant naval interests, yet is painted as the most [pro-Russian](#) member of the Commons all-party Russia committee. The media coverage claims that Ms Zatuliveter had access to a 'protected computer' at a Strasbourg conference, was able to obtain confidential defence documents because of Hancock's position on the defence committee, and supposedly attended 'confidential meetings' at the Council of Europe and elsewhere. Whether this is enough evidence to conclude she was a 'sleeper agent' for the Russians within Parliament remains to be seen.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the press and TV coverage of this case, however, is the highly sexualised coverage of the claims against Ms Zatuliveter, sustained by reporters' speculation and backed by anonymous official 'sources.' The [Telegraph](#) began its feature article on the case with, 'As a young blonde woman with an exotic name and a penchant for wearing short skirts, Ekaterina Zatuliveter was always likely to stand out in the dusty corridors of Parliament'. The piece was accompanied by a photo taken of Zatuliveter in a bikini while on holiday as a teenager.

A local newspaper from Whitby [commented](#) on a photo, describing Zatuliveter 'with her hands on the railings wearing casual dress she smiles at the camera with her hair blowing in the wind.' The *Daily Mail* describes Mr Hancock's '25-year-old glamorous Russian aide Katia Zatuliveter' and claims that 'she had ensnared him in a "honey-trap" sting to secure access to classified material.' Even the Australian [press](#) has run an analysis of past Russian spies' hair colours, claiming that sex masks serious threats from the Kremlin.

Matyas Eorsi, the former head of the European liberal group to which Hancock belonged, told *the Guardian* that Hancock was surrounded by long-legged, good-looking blondes, never older than 25, fluent in French, English and often German, and with a higher education. Eorsi said that 'I explained to them that all these girls were connected with the KGB-FSB'. And referring to Zatuliveter, another 'Westminster source' who said: 'She would walk around in very short skirts and high heels with Hancock and they would be seen having lunch together. Certainly some thought she was [charming and intelligent](#).'

It seems clear then for both journalists and their sources that Ms Zatuliveter's beauty, age, or hair colour are all judged highly relevant in forming the basis for such serious allegations. Yet, leaving aside possible connections to the FSB, why is it so surprising that young, educated women (not girls, I would point out) should be taking part in internships, or looking for jobs pointing towards a political career? Some commentators have pointed out that her researcher position in the Commons may have only served as

launch pad into a more powerful career in government. But that is precisely what hundreds of parliamentary researchers (many of whom are foreign) are trying to do. The LSE runs [a very popular scheme](#) that places many of our graduate students (often from overseas) with MPs as interns to do just that. So until we find out that Ms Zatuliveter's intentions were to penetrate the heart of British government in order to spy, it seems unfair to criticize her ambition as well.

If a man in her position were accused of espionage it is hard to imagine that his charm, fashion sense, intelligence, education, and language abilities, would all be considered as liabilities. Perhaps most shocking illustration of this is the treatment given to the story on 6 December by the BBC's *Newsnight*, supposedly a 'quality' News analysis programme. The clip (which begins at about 16 minutes into [the online version here](#)), shows a dramatized picture of a woman in a short skirt and knee-length, high-heeled boots swishing through the corridors of Portcullis House, in shots reminiscent of B-class spy movies. At one point the actress impersonating Ms Zatuliveter is even shown clicking her heels on the darkened streets around Big Ben and Victoria Embankment in a not-so-subtle allusion to street-walking or prostitution. The whole segment is high on drama, low on facts, and makes incredible jumps between Zatuliveter's deportation order and the alleged penetration of Russian spies throughout parliament and government.

Until the accusations have been properly investigated, and Ms Zatuliveter has had a chance to speak for herself, this case does not speak highly of British democracy. And while media coverage and anonymous 'official' sources continue to focus on her short skirts and high heels, it speaks volumes about the sexism still evident in British politics.

For an account of the first ten years of the LSE's Parliamentary Internship scheme, please see: [From LSE To Westminster: 10 years of student internships here](#).

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