

# First Impressions of Russia's Upcoming Presidential Election

Despite the near certainty of Vladimir Putin's reelection in the Russian presidential election next month, the campaign is nevertheless competitive with an array of choices, notes Gilbert Doctorow in this first of three articles on the election.

By Gilbert Doctorow

On Monday, February 18, one month before election day, Russia's presidential campaign moved into high gear. On that day, the Central Election Commission allocated to the candidates several hours each of free publicity on the five federal television channels, on major radio networks and free space in print media with national circulation.

This comes on top of daily news coverage of each and every candidate's activities in the field and invitations to appear on leading television talk shows and interviews which are dispensed by media producers at their option. And it is rounded out by advertising paid for by the electoral headquarters of the eight candidates.

The net result is that domestic politics are jostling with Olympics coverage and international news for the attention of the broad Russian public, and will continue to do so until the Day of Silence, 17 March, when the campaigns shut down in anticipation of the balloting the next day.

In the West, election news from Russia carried by mainstream media has centered on Alexei Navalny. Prior to his disqualification as a candidate by the Central Election Commission in December, he was characterized as posing the only real threat to Vladimir Putin's hold on power through his popular exposes of official and corporate corruption disseminated virally on social media and YouTube. All others in the race were put down as Kremlin controlled and tolerated only to give sham elections an appearance of authenticity.

When his candidacy was rejected due to an earlier criminal conviction, Navalny issued a call to boycott the election. He launched unsanctioned street demonstrations in Moscow and elsewhere, leading to scuffles with the police. Some of his supporters and Navalny himself were arrested and later released. But the protests were all on a small scale and Western media quickly lost interest.

**Meet the Candidates**

Now attention has refocused to the 36-year-old celebrity candidate Ksenia Sobchak, Russia's own Paris Hilton, a television personality who brought glamor, youth and a novel "vote against all" or "none of the above" slogan in support of her candidacy. It bears mentioning that Sobchak would be the first female candidate for the Russian presidency since 2004. In December 2017, she was quickly slotted into the race by winning support from the pro-Liberal "Civic Initiative" party, giving her a nationwide organizational presence and reduced requirements for gathering signatures of supporters to be registered.

In her first speeches on the campaign trail, Sobchak called out the abuses and inefficiency of the Russian bureaucracy. But her main fire was directed against the very stability of the Putin regime with its immutable elite and opposition leaders who have moved from middle age to pension age before her eyes and seem intent on remaining in office to the very end.

To this she added a number of foreign policy positions drawn from the liberal opposition that were sure to win her the attention and support of the West even if they ran against the clear preferences of the vast majority of the population as spelled out in the polls: namely her condemnation of the reunification with Crimea as a violation of international law and her insistence that there was no threat to Russia from NATO expansion.

Indeed, while her fellow candidates were traveling around their vast country to meet with voters, earlier this month Ksenia Sobchak made a trip to the United States, where among other activities, she was feted at the Center for International Strategic Studies in Washington, D.C. Her talk was piquantly entitled "Russia's Post-Authoritarian Future."

In the current international context, Sobchak's foreign policy positions and her cultivation of political support in the U.S. are seen as borderline treasonous behavior that falls into the tradition of the liberal opposition leaders in the Parnas political movement, Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov. In 2011, Nemtsov famously traveled to Arizona to see U.S. Senator John McCain and lend his support to American sanctions against Russia over alleged human rights abuses. Put inversely, Sobchak's American hosts receiving her in the midst of the presidential elections were necessarily guilty of egregious meddling in Russian domestic affairs.

The first poll results in January gave Sobchak about 1% of the electorate and little has changed since. However, in the same time frame there was great dynamism in the popular support for the candidate of the Communist Party, Pavel Grudinin, trending well over 10% and putting him in second place after Vladimir Putin, who enjoys the support of 70% likely voters. Despite their habitual disregard of the Communists, Western journalists took an interest. The fact that

Grudin in was not a Communist Party member made his personality all the more intriguing.

Surprisingly friendly articles about Grudin in began appearing in *The Financial Times* among other mainstream outlets. They highlighted the fact that he had made his mark as director of a prosperous farm complex in the Moscow region where he paid his workers more than double the national average salary and offered pre-school care, subsidized housing, free medical care and other social benefits from the Soviet era which he pledged to generalize across the country if elected. Grudin in was speaking the language of European social democracy, if you will, making a very agreeable contrast with the orthodox Communist ideology of the Party standard bearer in the previous four presidential elections going back to 1996, Gennadi Zyuganov.

With a likable demeanor, quiet self-confidence and enjoying the support of the country's largest full-scale national political machine after the United Russia ruling party backing Putin, Grudin in very quickly found himself in the crosshairs of the Kremlin elites.

The main news broadcasters Pervy Kanal and Rossiya-1 initiated regular coverage of a protest movement against Grudin in over allegations impugning his management of the Lenin State Farm that is his model for the future development of Russia: it was said that he had wrongfully cheated more than half of the farm's cooperative members-employees out of their shares during the 1990s and that the wealth of the farm came not from selling strawberries and other produce but from windfall profits in the disposal of some of its land holdings to developers. A second line of attack is that Grudin in had not declared a couple of bank accounts he held abroad.

From polls taken in mid-February, it would appear that this constant barrage of negative news halted the trending in Grudin in's favor and possibly dented his numbers. Nonetheless, with 7% of voters polled declaring their intention to vote for the Communist Party candidate, he remains second to Putin and just ahead of the anti-Communist, nationalist party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (LDPR).

Nonetheless, the ruling party is clearly not taking any chances and will be unrelenting in its attacks. The Sunday, February 18 edition of the widely viewed *News of the Week* program on Rossiya-1 dwelled for about 10 minutes on the Communists. Presenter Dmitry Kiselyov used questionable poll figures on voting intentions of Party members to argue that the decision to back the non-Party Grudin in opened the Communists to an internal division, with less than half its members prepared to vote for him. Kiselyov predicted the party's demise and called upon its leader Gennadi Zyuganov to reverse his decision and withdraw his support, this is the name of solicitude for Russia's still new and fragile

democracy.

This particular report by Kiselyov seems to have little if any factual basis. The notion that Grudinin's candidacy splits the Left runs counter to the process that led to his selection in the first place. That process bears mention here since it seems not to have been picked up by Western media.

In fact, many of the Left political movements, entailing more than a hundred organizations led by the Left Front and the Communist Party, collectively held primaries in which Grudinin won in a second-stage run-off. It was on this basis of his being a unity candidate of the Left that Gennady Zyuganov put Grudinin's name forward within his own party and then assumed the position of his campaign manager.

In the face of the various attacks from the Russian state news programs and in personal interviews on air from ill-disposed hosts, Grudinin has shown himself to be cool-headed and genial. In his 37-minute long January interview with Vladimir Solovyov on Rossiya-1, Grudinin managed to withstand harsh questioning and to get out his political program and beliefs, even forcing the presenter to acknowledge some common perspectives on the country's ills and to smile at some of his repartee.

### **Foreign Policy Continuity**

Grudinin calls for continuity in the country's foreign policy, to the point where he says he would keep in office Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Instead, the changes he seeks are in domestic policy. To ensure the social benefits mentioned above, he would introduce a progressive income tax, freeing the poor from tax but imposing a substantial levy on the wealthy. Moreover, he would require repatriation of oligarchs' wealth from abroad and ensure there would be no further private export of capital offshore. Finally, he would channel all profits from the country's oil and gas industry into the state coffers, while acting strictly through the law and independent courts. Heady stuff!

Coming in third in the mid-February polls with 5% electoral support, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is the candidate who has been receiving the most television air time now for months as a nearly daily guest on both principal talk shows produced by Rossiya-1, *Sixty Minutes* and *Evening with Vladimir Soloviev*. On these shows he is allowed by the indulgent presenters to dominate discussion, delivering a stream of outrageous comments on Russia's past, on relations with the United States and more that have great entertainment value even if they are far removed from day to day politics.

Thus, even in the “debate” between Zhirinovskiy and Grudinin which the popular talk show *Sixty Minutes* hosted a couple of weeks ago, and which has gathered more than 4 million “hits” on youtube, the LDPR leader was allowed to hog the microphone and Grudinin was doubly under pressure from the few questions pitched to him by the moderator.

Apart from his insistence on taking a strong stand against American provocations in Syria, in Ukraine, in its sanctions list, Zhirinovskiy’s platform focuses on domestic concerns like all other candidates. He decries unemployment levels, low living standards, unaffordable housing, for-pay medical care and education.

However, while calling for social welfare that is not dissimilar to the Communist Party’s program, Zhirinovskiy denounces the Soviet past for running a dysfunctional economy and for misguided internationalism at the expense of the welfare of the Russian people. Says Zhirinovskiy, the United States uses its foreign policy to bring in wealth, while the Soviet Union, and to a lesser degree Russia today only loses wealth on foreign adventures.

Zhirinovskiy’s main target in his campaign is not the ruling United Russia party but the Communists. In his television appearances he is a pit bull against Grudinin. For his support to Putin in the last Duma elections, Zhirinovskiy’s party was rewarded with the chairmanship of the Duma’s Foreign Affairs Committee. One may assume that if his run against Grudinin works, Zhirinovskiy and/or his party will get additional political spoils, perhaps at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself.

### **For Youth and Daring**

The opening of the Russian airwaves to promotional video clips, both free and paid for by the candidates, added an important new dimension by which their objectives and electoral prospects can be measured. Since no one in Russia or in the West seems to have made use of these new metrics, I will take the plunge in what follows.

First, the latest television spots for Ksenia Sobchak are head and shoulders above all other Russian electoral advertising. Both in terms of concept and in terms of execution, they bear the fingerprints of top international corporate public relations talent. Sobchak has been re-packaged and her entire message is concentrated in two words that are positive, attractive and impactful: “?? ????????? ? ?????????” – “for youth and daring.” This contrasts with her previously negative appeal of “none of the above” and matches the flair of Vladimir Putin’s own campaign slogan “a strong President for a strong country.”

Sobchak’s coiffure, her dress, her entire image has been reconfigured to combine

seriousness of purpose with womanly as opposed to girlish appeal. If she can stay to script on the campaign trail, the new Sobchak may be expected to multiply several fold the votes she draws on election day. This assumes she is not undone by alternative videos posted on YouTube by her enemies, contrasting the new idol of the creative classes in Moscow with her recent past as a narcissistic reality TV star. In any case, Sobchak's results will not threaten Vladimir Putin, but may set in place a credible foundation for further development of her political career in coming years.

Second in sophistication to Sobchak are the latest videos posted by the Yabloko candidate Grigory Yavlinsky. The perpetual candidate of this liberal party born in the 1990s that has enjoyed support among urban intellectuals in the two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, Yavlinsky has waged a low-key campaign and raised assorted issues like animal welfare in his talks on the campaign trail.

One new video clip repeats insistently the theme that Russians as a people have been inventive and at the cutting edge of technology for at least a couple of centuries but have been let down by their state and political culture. Meanwhile his latest video can easily be confused for a message from the Central Election Commission urging the population not to stay at home, not to watch the political process with folded arms but to go and vote on election day. Only in the last couple of seconds is the candidate himself identified. The clear purpose of this advert is to discredit Alexei Navalny and his call for a boycott.

Yavlinsky knows his chances of winning the presidency based on his fraction of a percent of popular support are nil, and this video suggests he has decided to use his opportunity as a candidate with air time to discredit the non-systemic and authoritarian Navalny. This is a variant of Zhirinovsky's attacks on Grudinin: candidates devouring one another while leaving the enormously popular Putin untouched.

Apart from Sobchak and Yavlinsky, the remaining challengers to Putin and United Russia have posted promotional videos which are primitive in both concept and execution, none more so than the videos of LDPR candidate Vladimir Zhirinovsky. In contrast to the relaxed and confidential tone of Sobchak and Yavlinsky, Zhirinovsky is intense and aggressive. He denounces poverty, unemployment and social injustice while making empty, unsupported promises of a bright future if he is elected. It is a safe bet that Zhirinovsky took no counsel from PR professionals and relied solely on his own instincts.

The Communist Party videos on behalf of Pavel Grudinin are also lacking in sophistication and emotional appeal. They do the candidate no favors. It is hard to say whether Grudinin's greater air time on talk shows and the like due to his leads in polls against the rest of the non-Putin field and his own relaxed and

attractive personality can compensate for the official media attacks and the disservice of mediocre advertising support from the Communist Party. Notwithstanding these deficiencies, it is entirely possible that Grudinin's ballot count on March 18 will be substantially higher than the polls now suggest. Not enough to force a run-off against Putin, but sufficient to revise expectations in the Party's favor during the next Duma elections.

Those in the West who have viewed the Russian presidential election of 2018 with disdain because of the near certainty that Vladimir Putin will win are missing the point. In the candidacies of Sobchak and Grudinin, in particular, we see the jostling for power in the next legislative elections of 2021 between what are new generation Right and Left forces directed against the centrist ruling United Russia Party. All of this will greatly affect the post-Putin succession process which will set in by 2022 given the "lame duck" phenomenon as the President's men make their own moves to secure their future without him.

**Gilbert Doctorow, an independent political analyst based in Brussels, is serving as an international observer to the March 18 presidential election in Russia. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was published on 12 October 2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.**

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## The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died

Exclusive: The FBI's Russia indictments last week have whipped Democrats and the mainstream media into a frenzy but the "scandal" may be collapsing under its own weight, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Fads and scandals often follow a set trajectory. They grow big, bigger, and then, finally, too big, at which point they topple over and collapse under the weight of their own internal contradictions. This was the fate of the "Me too" campaign, which started out as an exposé of serial abuser Harvey Weinstein but then went too far when Babe.net published a story about one woman's bad date with comedian Aziz Ansari. Suddenly, it became clear that different types of behavior were being lumped together in a dangerous way, and a once-explosive movement began to fizzle.

So, too, with Russiagate. After dominating the news for more than a year, the scandal may have at last reached a tipping point with last week's indictment of thirteen Russian individuals and three Russian corporations on charges of illegal interference in the 2016 presidential campaign. But the indictment landed with a decided thud for three reasons:

- It failed to connect the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the alleged St. Petersburg troll factory accused of political meddling, with Vladimir Putin, the all-purpose evil-doer who the corporate media say is out to destroy American democracy.
- It similarly failed to establish a connection with the Trump campaign and indeed went out of its way to describe contacts with the Russians as “unwitting.”
- It described the meddling itself as even more inept and amateurish than many had suspected.

After nine months of labor, Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller thus brought forth a mouse. Even if all the charges are true – something we'll probably never know since it's unlikely that any of the accused will be brought to trial – the indictment tells us virtually nothing that's new.

Yes, IRA staffers purchased \$100,000 worth of Facebook ads, 56 percent of which ran *after* Election Day. Yes, they persuaded someone in Florida to dress up as Hillary Clinton in a prison uniform and stand inside a cage mounted on a flatbed truck. And, yes, they also got another “real U.S. person,” as the indictment terms it, to stand in front of the White House with a sign saying, “Happy 55th Birthday Dear Boss,” a tribute, apparently, to IRA founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the convicted robber turned caterer whose birthday was three days away. Instead of a super-sophisticated spying operation, the indictment depicts a bumbling freelance operation that is still giving Putin heartburn months after the fact.

Not that this has stopped the media from whipping itself into a frenzy. “Russia is at war with our democracy,” screamed a headline in the Washington Post.

“Trump is ignoring the worst attack on America since 9/11,” blared another.

“...Russia is engaged in a virtual war against the United States through 21st-century tools of disinformation and propaganda,” declared the New York Times, while Daily Beast columnist Jonathan Alter tweeted that the IRA's activities amounted to nothing less than a “tech Pearl Harbor.”

All of which merely demonstrates, in proper backhanded fashion, how grievously Mueller has fallen short. Proof that the scandal had at last overstayed its welcome came five days later when the Guardian, a website that had previously



flogged Russiagate even more vigorously than the Post, the Times, or CNN, published a news analysis by Cas Mudde, an associate professor at the University of Georgia, admitting that it was all a farce – and a particularly self-defeating one at that.

Mudde's article made short work of hollow pieties about a neutral and objective investigation. Rather than an effort to get at the truth, Russiagate was a thinly-veiled effort at regime change. “[I]n the end,” he wrote, “the only question everyone really seems to care about is whether Donald Trump was involved – and can therefore be impeached for treason.

With last week's indictment, the article went on, “Democratic party leaders once again reassured their followers that this was the next logical step in the inevitable downfall of Trump.” The more Democrats play the Russiagate card, in other words, the nearer they will come to their goal of riding the Orange-Haired One out of town on a rail.

This makes the Dems seem crass, unscrupulous, and none too democratic. But then Mudde gave the knife a twist. The real trouble with the strategy, he said, is that it isn't working:

“While there is no doubt that the Trump camp was, and still is, filled with amoral and fraudulent people, and was very happy to take the Russians help during the elections, even encouraging it on the campaign, I do not think Mueller will be able to find conclusive evidence that Donald Trump himself colluded with Putin's Russia to win the elections. And that is the only thing that will lead to his impeachment as the Republican party is not risking political suicide for anything less.”

### **Other Objectives of “Russiagate”**

No collusion means no impeachment and hence no anti-Trump “color revolution” of the sort that was so effective in Georgia or the Ukraine. Moreover, while 53 percent of Americans believe that investigating Russiagate should be a top or at least an important priority according to a recent poll, figures for a half-dozen other issues ranging from Medicare and Social Security reform to tax policy, healthcare, infrastructure, and immigration are actually a good deal higher – 67 percent, 72 percent, or even more.

Summed up Mudde: “...the Russia-Trump collusion story might be the talk of the town in Washington, but this is not the case in much of the rest of the country.” Out in flyover country, rather, Americans can't figure out why the political elite is more concerned with a nonexistent scandal than with things that really count, i.e. de-industrialization, infrastructure decay, the opioid

epidemic, and school shootings. As society disintegrates, the only thing Democrats have accomplished with all their blathering about Russkis under the bed is to demonstrate just how cut off from the real world they are.

But Russiagate is not just about regime change, but other things as well. One is repression. Where once Democrats would have laughed off Russian trolls and the like, they're now obsessed with making a mountain out of a molehill in order to enforce mainstream opinion and marginalize ideas and opinions suspected of being un-American and hence pro-Russian. If the RT (Russia Today) news network is now suspect – the Times described it not long ago as “the slickly produced heart of a broad, often covert disinformation campaign designed to sow doubt about democratic institutions and destabilize the West” – then why not the BBC or Agence France-Presse? How long until foreign books are banned or foreign musicians?

“I’m actually surprised I haven’t been indicted,” tweets Bloomberg columnist Leonid Bershidsky. “I’m Russian, I was in the U.S. in 2016 and I published columns critical of both Clinton and Trump w/o registering as a foreign agent.” When the Times complains that Facebook “still sees itself as the bank that got robbed, rather than the architect who designed a bank with no safes, and no alarms or locks on the doors, and then acted surprised when burglars struck,” then it’s clear that the goal is to force Facebook to rein in its activities or stand by and watch as others do so instead.

Add to this the classic moral panic promoted by #MeToo – to believe charges of sexual harassment and assault without first demanding evidence “is to disbelieve, and deny due process to, the accused,” notes Judith Levine in the Boston Review – and it’s clear that a powerful wave of cultural conservatism is crashing down on the United States, much of it originating in a classic neoliberal-Hillaryite milieu. Formerly the liberal alternative, the Democratic Party is now passing the Republicans on the right.

But Russiagate is about something else as well: war. As National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster warns that the “time is now” to act against Iran, the New York Times slams Trump for not imposing sanctions on Moscow, and a spooky “Nuclear Posture Review” suggests that the US might someday respond to a cyber attack with atomic weapons, it’s plain that Washington is itching for a showdown that will somehow undo the mistakes of the previous administration. The more Trump drags his feet, the more Democrats conclude that a war drive is the best way to bring him to his knees.

Thus, low-grade political interference is elevated into a *casus belli* while Vladimir Putin is portrayed as a supernatural villain straight out of *Harry Potter*. But where does it stop? Libya has been set back decades, Syria, the

subject of yet another US regime-change effort, has been all but destroyed, while Yemen – which America helps Saudi Arabia bomb virtually around the clock – is now a disaster area with some 9,000 people killed, 50,000 injured, a million-plus cholera cases, and more than half of all hospitals and clinics destroyed.

The more Democrats pound the war drums, the more death and destruction will ensue. The process is well underway in Syria, the victim of Israeli bombings and a US-Turkish invasion, and it will undoubtedly spread as Dems turn up the heat. If the pathetic pseudo-scandal known as Russiagate really is collapsing under its own weight, then it's not a moment too soon.

**Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).**

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