

How the Russian Presidential Election Race Looks in its Final Days

Following up on his Feb. 24 article, "[First Impressions of Russia's Upcoming Presidential Election](#)," independent political analyst Gilbert Doctorow takes a close look at how the election is shaping up in the days before the vote.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The candidates for the presidency in Russia's election this Sunday are now in the home stretch. Not much has changed in the past several weeks as regards the standings of each in the polls of voter sympathies. Vladimir Putin holds the lead, way out in front, with nearly 70% of voters saying they will cast their votes for him. The candidate of the Communist Party, Pavel Grudinin, has held on to second place, at just over 7% despite suffering some severe setbacks over revelations of his bank accounts held abroad. And third place, with just over 5% goes to the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the LDPR.

Liberal candidate, Ksenia Sobchak, who positioned herself to catch the protest vote "against all," has about 1.5%. The remaining four candidates – Sergei Baburin, Maxim Suraikin on the Communist Left and Boris Titov, Grigory Yavlinsky on the Liberal Right – have fractions of one percent of the electorate committed to them.



Candidate Putin appears on track to achieve the 70:70 target that his campaign team set for him, meaning a turnout on election day of 70% of the electorate, of which 70% vote for Putin. Such results would support a claim to popular validation of his domestic and foreign programs for the coming six years. It would give him a free hand for substantial reworking of the cabinet, which, rumor says, may come in the days immediately ahead.

However, the campaign is about process as much as it is about results, and at that level there is a great deal which merits consideration because of what this electoral campaign says about the condition of Russian democracy today and where the country is headed.

The campaign has had several dimensions, some of which require that you be physically present to experience them, others of which can be followed from remote, as I have done. For total immersion, one would have to follow the various candidates around the country as they have visited factories, hospitals,

farms and all manner of locations to speak and meet with voters. This has been done daily by the Russian media, and so some feel for it can be acquired remotely. For a further broadly based understanding, one would have to pick up the print media at newsstands and tune in to the major federal radio stations which have allocated time to the candidates under rules established by the Central Election Commission. All of this I and others watching from abroad have missed.

What has been available to us outside the country is all of the televised debates, since they were posted on YouTube often within minutes of their broadcast on air. That and campaign materials posted on Russian social media, which I will discuss below. All of this constitutes invaluable material to see the impressive extent of pluralism, free speech and media access allowed in Putin's Russia to his challengers, however slight their share of voter support may be. That in itself is quite a revelation.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the analysis which follows is to reach a fair-minded understanding of the processes under way, not to hand bouquets to the incumbent or to anyone else. Following that guiding principle, I will highlight not only the high degree of democratic freedom in evidence but also the thumb on the scales in favor of the ruling party.

The Debates: Some Observations

When I wrote my first impressions of the campaign on February 24, just after the first televised debate, the full strategy of holding debates and their format were not known to any of us, including the candidates themselves, as I deduce from the bitter complaints they made over the early hour of the broadcast, over its being taped rather than going out live, over there being no face to face dueling, just a couple of minutes time to respond to questions pitched by the presenter to each of them separately. On that first day, the candidates were outraged that the subject for the debate was foreign relations, when as it turned out, none but Zhirinovskiy has much experience or knowledge or interest in foreign policy – their programs being constructed strictly around domestic policy and the economy in particular.

To be sure, it is peculiar that the candidates were kept in the dark about the procedures and format, for which the Central Election Commission is to blame. As we subsequently saw, these debates had formats that varied in some important ways from channel to channel, including the issue of live versus taped broadcast.

Over the course of the nearly three weeks of debates, changes came about in format that were initiated by the candidates themselves, beginning with Ksenia

Sobchak, who was quickest off the mark and most determined not to be told how to behave by the very people she urges the electorate to vote against as a played out generation. Specifically, Sobchak was the first to do what any experienced public figure regularly does on interview programs or talk shows: ignore the question and use the microphone given to her to speak directly to voters about what she considered important. She was not censored, the tapes were not cut and thereafter such a possibility was stated by presenters on some of the debates so that other candidates could avail themselves of the same option. Few did.

Sobchak definitely added color and at times scandal to the entire debating process. In this respect, she was fully the match of nationalist party candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy who has for decades has had exactly that niche position to himself in electoral politics and in talk shows. The other candidates were not dull, but were far more polite, and so less newsworthy.

Part of Zhirinovskiy's bag of tricks as television personality has always been his dress code. At times he has come to interviews and talk shows looking formal in a business suit, but very often he has worn firetruck red sports jackets or other attention-grabbing outfits. Here again, Ksenia Sobchak has done the same in the debates, changing her coiffure, changing her clothes to project different policy positions in her electoral platform. On one day she wore a sweat shirt with big anti-war legend to support what she had to say on how Putin is the war party, whereas she stands for good neighborly relations with all and redirection of Ministry of Defense spending to domestic infrastructure needs.

Along the way, Sobchak has taken some very unpopular stands, particularly with respect to Crimea and what she calls the illegitimate Russian occupation there. This has cost her dearly. Polls show that with a bit more than 1% ready to vote for her, 80% of the electorate say they would never vote for her, making her the most unpopular of all the candidates in the race. However, one can have no doubt that Sobchak and her advisers hold the view that it is better to be hated than to be unknown.

At 36, she has plenty of time ahead to choose policies that will be more in line with the broad population and at that point everyone on the stage with her will have retired. My clear conclusion is that this race has shown Sobchak as the person to watch in the Duma elections of 2021 and in the next presidential race of 2024.

Looking back at the whole series of debates, it is clear now in retrospect that the organizers intended to give all candidates the opportunity to set out broad platforms touching upon every major sector of domestic and foreign policy. On separate days the following issues were featured on each of the channels:

- foreign policy
- youth, education and development of human potential
- development of the regions
- development of industry and especially the military industrial complex
- demography, motherhood and childhood
- health, the social sphere and provisions for the handicapped
- the Russian national idea

It is essential to remember that equal time was granted to all, that all were invited to participate in person or by proxy regardless of their actual support levels in the population. In the United States such equal access may occur during the primaries in each party, but is choked off once party nominations for the two main parties, Democratic and Republican are closed, with only their respective nominees invited to debate on national television. If the Russian practice were applied to the U.S., it would be as if the Greens and Libertarians were debating with Democrats and Republicans, along with candidates of other still smaller parties with miniscule numbers of registered voters.

The Russian debates were held not only on the two leading news channels, Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, but also on the less watched but still important federal channels Public Broadcasting (ORT) and Television Center (TVTs), both of which posted some debates on YouTube. There were televised debates as well at the regional level to which some candidates sent proxies. One on the Ryazan station of Rossiya-1 for example dated 14 March was posted to YouTube. By their presence or absence, the candidates themselves made it fairly clear that they valued above all Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, and these are the channels that I monitored.

From among these many posted videos, I have decided to highlight here the debates from 13 March, the next to the last day of such televised debates. I think it is preferable to drill down on one day than to skim the surface on several weeks of shows. Moreover, the debates of the 13th on the two leading channels are useful to highlight some very specific Russian features of the country's political class across the board.

In Pervy Kanal, the subject of the day was relations between the federal capital, Moscow, and the regions. The candidates were unanimous in decrying the present situation, which has not successfully addressed and perhaps has even aggravated over the past couple of decades the very large discrepancies between the "donor regions" of Moscow and a handful of other regions enjoying budgetary surpluses, the best salaries in the country and extensive public services and amenities versus the "deficit regions" which are more than 80% of the federal regions, all in chronic need of funding from the central government, struggling

with heavy debts to credit institutions and where the salary levels and public services are many times below those of the donor regions.

For this, the Communist Left candidates found cause in the privatization of state assets that led to plundering of resources and removal of wealth from where it is generated to Moscow and beyond to offshore accounts. The Liberal Right candidates found fault with excessive concentration of budgetary decision making and political power in Moscow, resulting in provincial governors waiting in the corridors of the Ministry of Finance to get handouts to be spent as Moscow directed, not in accordance with local priorities.

Of course, both Liberals Sobchak and Yavlinsky hammered home the need for local mayors and governors to be elected by those whom they govern, not appointed by the Kremlin from among apparatchiki. The issue is valid and highly relevant to whether/how Russia can become dynamic as an economy and as a polity.

And it also was of considerable value to the voter to hear from Boris Titov that fellow liberal Ksenia Sobchak was caught in a contradiction over her support for greater financial independence of the regions, given that her announced preference for Finance Minister should she win the election is Alexei Kudrin, who formerly served under Putin in this capacity, was always and remains in favor of centralization while disparaging local control of finance as likely only to feed corruption and misuse of power.

In passing, this discussion on Pervy Kanal brought out a number of other very important failings of the Putin years as they affect the broad population. One in particular is worth mentioning: the limited nature of "gasification" of the countryside, which is not more than 60% of the population. It was noted that Gazprom has earned 600 billion euros in the past decade largely from exports but has invested only 10 billion euros in bringing gas to the households of Russia itself. The point is painful to the whole rural population of the country which has to cope with the difficult logistics of bottled gas for cooking and wooden logs for heating.

The Rossiya-1 debate of March 13 highlighted the special characteristics of Russia's political class whatever their policy orientation. This typology is not unique, but special and on the Continent, it is closest, perhaps, to France. By this I mean the high intellectual achievements of *all* the candidates. Two of the candidates, Sergei Baburin and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, hold Ph.D. degrees. All seven are well educated in terms of general culture, well-read and appreciative of wit and the ability to draw lessons from literature in fellow candidates whose political positions they otherwise may ridicule.

The topic for the Rossiya-1 debate, "culture, art and preservation of historical

memory” was particularly amenable to honest discussion among the candidates. The show which resulted in many ways resembled more a drawing room scene from a Tolstoy or Dostoevsky novel than a political debate in the closing phase of a presidential election race. The candidates were unanimously scathing in their criticism of the current management of culture by Minister Medinsky even if their perspectives on the reasons for the unacceptable state of things are diametrically opposed, ranging from the intrusive and corrupting influence of power and wealth in the appraisal of the Communist Left as opposed to the Liberal Right’s underlining mediocracy resulting from the stultifying influence of a bureaucracy directing and financing culture without the participation of sponsors from the broad base of the business community.

The salon nature of the discussion in which candidates even hastened to support the critiques of the status quo leveled by others was heavily encouraged by the demeanor of the “moderator,” Vladimir Solovyov who, for this debate handled himself not according to the script of the CEC, that is, as a detached timekeeper and referee to keep the debaters within order, but instead as he usually does on his own talk shows, intervening and guiding the discussion while expressing his personal opinions.

It was fascinating to observe the common cultural heritage of all candidates regardless not only of political views but of personal wealth and life experience. In this regard, one or another of the Communist-minded candidates, otherwise critical of the bourgeoisie and oligarchy, were treated with respect similarly to that shown to the consumptive Socialist youth Hippolyte Terentiev by the very proper and aristocratic General Yepanchin and his wife and daughters in *The Idiot* who took him in during his final weeks. And surely one of the most exceptional moments in this electoral campaign was the lengthy citation by Pavel Grudinin’s proxy Maxim Shevchenko of the conversation between Christ and the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, all to make a point about power and art in the Russian mind.

In my “first impressions” and in the transcript of the first televised debate on the Pervy Kanal state network that I issued a couple of days later, I suggested that the Russian campaign is all high-level, intellectual combat in an agora of ideas, which to American ears in particular would be a day and night contrast with the tawdry spectacle of mudslinging and ad hominem argumentation that constituted the 2016 American presidential race.

However, my initial impressions did not take in what was excised from the first debate when it was posted on YouTube: namely a vicious exchange between two candidates, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Ksenia Sobchak, which may just have sunk lower than even the Clinton-Trump debates. Russia, like the Soviet Union before

it, often justifies the arch remark that what is fully prohibited is also permitted. In the full, uncut video, a pirated version of which of course found its way onto the internet within hours, we hear Zhirinovskiy describe Sobchak, who was at a lectern just next to his, as a “streetwalker,” if I may be allowed a euphemism. In response to which, she doused him with the water in her drinking glass.

A less enjoyable and more irritating problem with the first televised debates which fit precisely the habits of Russian political talk shows, such as the moderators of these debates otherwise host, was shouting down speakers and boisterous heckling. Here again, the most egregious offenders were precisely Zhirinovskiy and Sobchak. Be that as it may, a technical solution was eventually implemented at least on the Pervy Kanal so that by the last debates only one selected candidate had a live microphone at a time.

This obvious and easy to implement solution ensuring unhindered speech by each candidate was not implemented at Rossiya-1 for reasons that are unclear. The result was a second shameful incident marring the record of the debates in what was the very last round on Rossiya-1 yesterday, 14 March. Moderator Vladimir Solovyov claimed he could do nothing towards the end of the show when all 6 male candidates simultaneously subjected Sobchak to verbal abuse for her “fifth column” positions with respect to the national defense and her betrayal to American interests in her latest interview with CNN. Sobchak walked out of the studio in tears just minutes before the curtain came down.

Absence of Putin

One distinguishing feature of the debates was the absence of the President, who chose to neither participate in person, nor to send a proxy.

As it turned out, the absence of Putin from these debates was entirely justified by the utterly unruly behavior and scandals at times during the series. Moreover, had the President or his representative been present he would have been the subject of attack from all seven challengers in unison, a very unfair situation for him and not very enlightening for the electorate.

At the same time, it is very clear that those managing the incumbent’s campaign were exploiting every *legal* means to dominate, indeed to overwhelm all his opponents taken together with high quality viewer and listener time singing his praises and arguing for more of the same in the coming six years. These legal means included the delivery of his annual address to the Federal Assembly, the Russian equivalent to the State of the Union address of the American President, in the midst of the electoral campaign, on March 1. This gave Vladimir Putin two hours on all the airwaves to set out what is in effect a program for his next

term.

Another device used to put the President before the electorate in a privileged manner was the launch in the past week of two new, sophisticated and full-length documentary films about Vladimir Putin. One, entitled "World Order 2018" features the popular talk show host Vladimir Solovyov as Putin's interlocutor or interviewer.

As we have seen, Solovyov was also the moderator of the debates on the channel Rossiya-1. The film itself is professional if not brilliant. It contains a number of good sound bites from Putin, such as his recollections of his first visit to Germany in 1992 as an assistant to St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak. As he explains here, their meeting with Chancellor Helmut Kohl provided Putin with material that he later used to advantage when he returned to Germany in 2002 as Russian President and delivered a speech to the Bundestag. There are also interesting remarks by Putin about the days immediately following the coup d'etat in Kiev on February 22, 2014 and the behavior of the U.S. And I would point to Putin's comments about relations with Turkey and about the special Turkish interest in the Crimean Tatars.

The second documentary, simply entitled "Putin," was produced by the professional film maker Andrei Kondrashov, who is in the President's election campaign team. Kondrashov is no newcomer to Putin promotion. In March 2015, on the first anniversary of the reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation, he launched the entertaining "Crimea, A Way Home," which featured dramatic footage of the way Putin and his security team rescued deposed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich from almost certain capture and execution by the radical nationalists. With the help of excellent visuals, Kondrashov's new film gives us the family history of the Putins in the countryside of the Tver region, interviews with those who knew Vladimir Putin in his youth and at turning points in his career, all told with great human warmth.

To avoid violation of the federal regulations on a candidate's using the federal television channels for unfair free publicity, these documentaries were released onto the Russian social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, where they apparently have won a large audience. In its first week, "World Order" is said to have found 15 million viewers. Meanwhile, sound bites from these documentaries were picked up by the major news programs of the federal channels as "news," pure and simple. Legal, to be sure, but aggressive campaign devices.

To this we can add Vladimir Putin's interview with Megyn Kelley of CNN in his capacity as President, not candidate, filmed in part immediately following his delivery of his address to the Federal Assembly on 1 March and in conclusion the next day on his visit to Kaliningrad. From start to finish, this filmed

interview shows Putin as projecting strength. We see this in his blunt rejection of U.S. allegations of Russian electoral interference in 2016 coming out of the Mueller indictments.

We see it still more clearly in his lengthy explanation of the military hardware part of his March 1 address, showing off Russia's new cutting edge technology nuclear weapons systems and claiming full restoration of strategic parity with the United States. Who could ignore his wry smile over how the vast sums which the United States had spent developing global ABM systems for the sake of a first strike capability were now demonstrably money thrown out the window.

More generally, there is an issue over the way that leading news programs on the federal channels have become pro-Putin voice boxes. Nowhere is this more true than in Dmitri Kiselyov's News of the Week shows on Sunday evenings.

In my "First Impressions" article, I remarked on Kiselyov's 15-minute segment on 17 February devoted to Communist candidate Pavel Grudinin. That was an expanded version of what was being reported in the news bulletins on Rossiya- and Pervy Kanal daily. The objective was to discredit the underlying claims of Grudinin's candidacy, namely that his profitable Lenin State Farm complex in the Moscow suburbs, paying wages double the national average and providing cheap housing, free day care, free medical care for his employees is the model he intends to generalize all over the country to bring socialist welfare to every home.

Kiselyov directed attention to the complaints filed against Grudinin by elderly pensioners who say they were defrauded by Grudinin in the 1990s when he essentially privatized the state farm and deprived some of its members of their stake in the land assets. Kiselyov further argued that the prosperity of Grudinin's farm comes not from the strawberries it cultivates in great quantities for the Moscow market but from land transactions including rentals and sales from the highly desirable territory it owns in the sought after metropolitan area. A third line of attack focused on the villa and other residence owned in Latvia by Grudinin's son, whose wife had acquired Latvian citizenship. These were described as "emergency airport" facilities for the candidate in case he ever felt the need to leave Russia in a hurry. Kiselyov closed his commentary with a recommendation to Communist Party president Zyuganov that he withdraw support from the non-Party Grudinin before he does irreparable damage to his party and thereby also harms Russia's young democracy. The whiff of sarcasm there and condescension was pungent.

This singling out of the Communist Party candidate for attack by state television news acting as investigator was patently unfair. That kind of sleuthing and exposure should have been done by the other candidates, not by the State. Nonetheless, as it turned out Kiselyov's and Russian state television's

focus on Grudinin's moral weaknesses was not unjustified. He was finally "nailed" in an unrelated matter impugning his integrity and the whole claim of the Left to be morally superior to the corrupt and oligarch-infested regime of Vladimir Putin and the United Russia Party.

It was discovered that contrary to Grudinin's declarations to Zyuganov and to the federal electoral commission when applying for registration of his candidacy, Grudinin has some 13 bank accounts in Switzerland holding assets close to a million dollars, as well as some 5 kilograms of physical gold worth a couple of hundred thousand dollars. This was confirmed in writing to the Central Election Commission (CEC) by UBS Bank in Switzerland. The CEC decided not to disqualify Grudinin, as was their option, but could be highly provocative and destabilizing. They merely will post these accounts abroad on the highly visible list of assets owned by each of the candidates at every voting station. But the damage was done to Grudinin's reputation among the Party faithful. Grudinin stopped entirely appearing on the debates and sent only proxies.

The scandal also damaged the reputation of Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov for failure to do due diligence. One almost certain consequence of these elections will be Zyuganov's retirement from office and the coming to power in the Communist Party of young blood.

A word of explanation about the lists of candidate assets: this has become a tradition in Russian federal elections within the concept of full transparency. At each polling station voters can read about the holdings of the candidates and their immediate family as regards assets in banks, apartments and other real estate, and cars among other property categories. In this regard, two liberal candidates, Ksenia Sobchak and Boris Titov, will stand out for their personal wealth valued at more than one million euros. However, both are supporters of the free market with its rewards, whereas the Communists make a virtue of wealth redistribution and equality.

It is unlikely there will be any great surprises in the election's outcome on 18 March, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the whole exercise is a farce. Russia's young democracy is a work in progress. The debates and other procedures of the electoral campaign are evolving, even if the content – namely credible and experienced candidates for the nation's highest office – remains unsatisfactory. Partly this results from the concentration of political power in Moscow and the still rudimentary self-government across the country that would normally develop future leaders. This will have to be addressed in Putin's final term in office if there is to be a handover of power in 2024 to a worthy successor.

The balloting itself will be another test of the consolidating mechanisms of

democracy. The Kremlin says it has done everything possible to ensure fair and transparent elections. Advanced technology has been put in place to make every polling station accessible online, so that electoral monitoring by remote is a reality. Moreover, on a pilot basis the Russians have deployed what they say is block-chain technology to make the voting hack-proof.

As an international election observer serving with an NGO, I expect to see firsthand the results of these efforts to reassure Russians and the world at large that democracy is on the move in Russia. I will issue a report on what I see in the days immediately following the election.

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