

Letter From the Editors: Feb. 6-12, 2017

Kremlin's Election Catch-22; Trump and Putin: Bros or Foes?

The Kremlin has an [election problem](#). It needs to get Vladimir Putin reinstated as president in the March 2018 election, but it needs voters to care about voting to show up to the polls. Right now, not many people do, since electoral outcomes seem generally predetermined making voting pointless. So the goal is to get people interested in the election by perhaps giving voters enticing ballot options. But the problem is that Russians are politically illiterate, if you believe a federal official cited by RBC who says that except for the Duma faction leaders and a few high-ranking officials like Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, there are no other names recognizable to the voters. There had been talk that the Kremlin would try to get the perennial establishment opposition leaders to step aside and let younger, fresher faces run in the election, but according to RBC's source, that is not going to happen.

Russia's tired opposition faces are all familiar from the 1990s (LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy proudly boasts he is running for president for the sixth time – a record in Europe), and they more or less all have the Kremlin's blessing and march to the beat of its drum. In fact, the Russian Federation Communist Party and A Just Russia, which have not yet officially nominated presidential candidates, have said they are going to "discuss the issue with the Kremlin." I guess they need Putin's approval. So no matter who you vote for, you're likely voting for Putin's agenda.

There are, however, a few brave politicians bucking the Kremlin line. Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky, another political old-timer, is rousing his base and reaching out to young voters with the message that Putin is living in the past and making a "shameful, harmful and criminal" land grab in Ukraine that does nothing good for Russia. Aleksei Navalny, Russia's most popular opposition figure, who was just given another five-year suspended sentence in a retrial of a previous conviction, approves of the message but pokes fun at the messenger for being a 1990s throwback.

It turns out that Russia's most popular politician may not even be from Russia. For a while, US President Donald Trump was being mentioned in the Russian media far more than Putin, leading [Kirill Kharatyan](#) to speculate what it is about Trump that's so appealing to Russians. He says Trump's blunt political incorrectness and brazen determination resonate with voters (these characteristics are partly what had enthralled Russians about Putin, before he started losing his mojo). [Yury Saprykin](#) agrees that there are a lot of similarities between Trump and Putin, including their manipulative rhetoric. However, he says that whereas Putin is covert and calculating, Trump is unabashedly public and wildly unpredictable, so "the hope of Russian patriots that Putin and Trump are on the verge of dividing the world in half and establishing something akin to a conservative international is a purely Russian aberration." In other words, a bromance might not be in the offing. In fact, Saprykin says the cold snap in US-Russian relations just might get longer and colder.

But we've got other things to worry about besides the climate change in Russian-US relations. [Aleksandr Golts](#) says the new US president is a loose cannon smashing through the global ship that had been bearing humanity toward rosy horizons on a liberal, progressive tack. Golts says that for Trump, there are no supreme values (like actual climate change) – only interests. [Konstantin Simonov](#) says progressives need to lash the cannon and get the ship back on the values course, but the problem is that progressives have too readily and for too long overlooked the shortcomings of their agenda – particularly globalization – to the detriment of those left behind. While Obama was a president who was perhaps too focused on the future, Trump is a president too focused on the past. We are left wondering: Is Trump a temporary eclipse, or have the planets drastically realigned in the political orbit?

Matthew Larson,
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