

• Author: [Ivan Davydov](#)

An Election With No Alternatives



In addition to the list of purchased items and other messages, supermarket receipts bear a reminder: ‘18 March: Elections of the President of the Russian Federation’. Schools devote their classes to the elections and run ‘research projects’ where children are forced to conduct surveys on their parents, asking whether they are going to the polls and who they will vote for.

Enterprises appoint particular individuals as responsible for ensuring their fellow employees show up to vote. Individuals given special authorisation walk around local neighbourhoods, reminding residents that an elections is about to take place. On a more overtly official level, both the Central Election Commission’s adverts and entertainment TV channels are promoting the idea of going to the polls. The popular TV show *Comedy Club* recently ran a skit where Russians were told that it is necessary to go to the elections — but it’s not quite so necessary, the skit mentioned, to take drugs along or try to talk with the election committees using “prisoner’s slang.” Models in *Maxim*, a men’s journal, literally try to drag voters into polling booths, making photoshoots where models beckon you inside the booths.

A campaign without an opponent

It seems that Russian citizens have not been urged to vote with so much energy and passion ever before in the

history of presidential elections in Russia. One gets the strange impression that the elections actually consist in going to the polls only. There is little talk of who or what they'll be going there for. Day to day news, as well as overview shows, offer only brief and almost neutral reports on candidates' actions: Where they went; whom they met; where they gave a lecture or which farm or factory they visited. A Russian citizen who is not part of a political debate and is not engaged in a constant search for online news might struggle to remember that the elections are not just about going to the polls but also about voting for someone. They might not be aware that as many as eight politicians are running for president and they actually differ from one other.

The illusion of the possibility of a contest faded away when the opposition politician Aleksei Navalny was banned from running in the elections (an illusion is the right word here; the Kremlin won't risk letting Navalny speak on federal TV channels within mandatory candidate debates; few people in Navalny's committee had any doubts about that). Navalny began his campaign exactly one year before the election date was officially announced. It was his activities, such as tours around the country, the emergence of dozens of regional committees, meetings with voters, that were the mainstay of political life in Russia for a long time. His street actions, which attracted a large number of young people, previously thought to be apolitical, forced Putin to conduct a series of meetings with schoolchildren where, in order to show that he was also keeping pace with the times, Putin told the children about video tapes and other 'hot news' from the world of technology.

One must honestly admit that the refusal to register was an expected but nevertheless a painful blow for Navalny. Now, his electoral committees are campaigning for a boycott of the elections and are trying to attract activists to the polling stations in the capacity of observers. However, it seems that it is not possible to fully reorient the mobilised supporters towards a boycott: the "voters' strike" on 28 January turned out to be far smaller in scale than previous street actions. The activities undertaken by regional committees no longer attract strong media interest. Nevertheless, it is Navalny and his supporters who remain the main, if not the only threat in the eyes of the Kremlin: leaflets get confiscated, committees' work gets hindered, and activists are prosecuted. For instance, the head of Navalny's federal election committee, Leonid Volkov, was arrested repeatedly on absurd charges. The chances are high that Navalny will spend the election day in a temporary detention facility: an excuse for the arrest will certainly be found. The unprecedented campaign in support for electoral turnout can be understood as a response to calls for a 'voters' strike'. Which, of course, is only one of its meanings.

A campaign without a candidate

Putin delayed the announcement of his candidacy until the very last moment. The announcement itself became a genuine show but the show was soon over and, not surprisingly, Putin refused to participate in candidates' debates. Further on, somewhat unexpectedly, he refused to be filmed in his own electoral videos. For some time the confidants of the main candidate flashed on TV screens, among them astronauts, politicians, physicians, actors and comedians. But even their activity gradually faded away. Perhaps the most exciting piece news from Putin's headquarters during the last two weeks is as follows: "A pancake-making workshop was held at the Moscow's headquarters."

Putin's programme as a presidential candidate has not yet been published. And yet, according to a poll conducted by VCIOM, the Russia Public Opinion Research Center, more than a half of Russians say they know the programme of Putin as a candidate. At the same time, President Putin continues to work, he holds meetings and talks, sends salutary telegrams to various recipients etc. This is a standard method to avoid tackling legislative problems that requires equal presence of all candidates on TV. Putin never goes on vacation during the campaign, and he appears on screen not as a candidate but as the country's president. The message is more than clear: while competitors are preoccupied with meaningless chatter, the president is busy with real work for the country. He just has no time to get distracted by the electoral hustle and bustle. The president believes in his people, and the people will figure out who should be elected, without any electoral pageantry.

At the same time, the image of Putin gets miraculously split. On 13 February, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that his boss had caught a slight cold. Soon afterwards, on 15 February, Putin was back on air: the news showed protocol photos from a meeting between the Russian president and the King of Jordan. However, politicised online users have been discussing the issue for two weeks now, wondering where the president disappeared, and giving the most bizarre hypotheses on what happened to him. In the imagination of ordinary

voters (who are TV viewers), the president is busy with ordinary business: he meets with members of the Security Council and governors, makes forcible statements, congratulates the military on the Fatherland Defenders' Day, and sends greetings to writer Alexander Prokhanov on his 80th birthday. Activists concerned about politics are wondering whether Putin is alive at all, and are waiting for him to return to the campaign on 1 March.

On 1 March, Putin will deliver the annual address to the Federal Assembly (although it is unclear if the address can still be called 'annual' as it was skipped in 2017). The postponement of the address until March 2018 looks somewhat strange: if the elections are to be taken seriously, Putin would assign tasks to his subordinates for a period of merely two weeks. What if someone else wins and President Suraykin or President Baburin do not agree with their predecessor's postulates?

However, no one, not even the president, takes the elections seriously. The outcome is known, there is no competition, no intrigue, and President Putin can afford to make his address 17 days before the voting day. And, of course, the Central Election Commission will not view the address as an element of illegal campaigning: after all, the person speaking is the president, not a candidate!

Window-dressing and misunderstandings

Vladimir Zhirinovsky calls Russians to settle in villages and promises to help them with the move. Grigory Yavlinsky uses elements from his last Duma campaign in his presidential campaign videos. In fact, those veterans are not even back-up dancers. They are part of window-dressing efforts, disguising the inevitable victory of the main candidate. Their task is to depict the presence of political discord: we have some radicals here, and some old-school liberals there. They have no complaints or qualms about this; their place in the system has long been clear for everyone, including themselves.

In addition to political window-dressing, there have also been some bizarre political misunderstandings, such as Sergei Baburin, Maxim Suraykin and Boris Titov. Their presence on stage makes no sense at all; they represent no ideas and have no supporters. They merely bring some variety to the landscape. Next to the castle of the bandits, with roaring Zhirinovsky, and the idyllic hut of troubadour Yavlinsky, some other shrubs can be seen here and there. Their task is not to represent diversity of opinions but, instead, the diversity and unruliness of nature itself. They could easily be replaced by a handful of other random people. However, these three were first to be recruited by the electoral architects from the presidential administration and, as such, can consider themselves lucky.

However, there are two exceptions. The Communist Party candidate, Pavel Grudinin, a rich man who earned his fortune from state farms, and Ksenia Sobchak. In fact, Grudinin looked like a godsend: a new face on the left flank, instead of Gennady Zyuganov (even the communists have had enough of him), capable of provoking at least some interest in the elections that otherwise involved no choice and no conflict. However, to Grudinin's misfortune, it was decided that a conflict was actually needed, which means that the "strawberry king" has become the only target for attacks for state-owned TV channels. The plot involving 'the threat of red revenge' is old and tested, even though nobody believes in any revenge today. Nevertheless, Grudinin has been "unmasked" tirelessly, with the media covering scandals around his foreign accounts, his sons' real estate overseas. Even poor farmers, supposedly harmed by the 'red magnate', were invited to TV shows. This is a sad spectacle, one that worries Gennady Zyuganov, who, as the chief of Grudinin's committee, writes denunciations and complaints to Putin. That's right, no mistake here: the chief of a candidate's committee sends complaints to a rival candidate about the flow of his own campaign he is himself running.

This is how a shaky model of an intrigue is concocted: the election specialists who are close to the Kremlin try to find a threat, show their work and pool the funds. Some voters might even think: if they are bashing the candidate, they must be afraid of him, so the voter will attend the otherwise boring elections. In other words, the task of boosting the turnout can involve some profiteering, too. The only trouble is with Grudinin himself. After all these attacks he certainly has no political future. Moreover, he has turned into a hero of memes and political anecdotes, which is even sadder for him than the streams of compromising evidence: it is hard to run for an important post when nobody takes you seriously.

On the other hand, it seems that a brighter political future has been marked out for Ksenia Sobchak. By

agreeing to run in the elections, she solved one task posed by the Kremlin — i.e. to divert some of Navalny's supporters. It was not without a reason that Sobchak was called "Navalny's spoiler". Of course, Sobchak simply could not help but be an instrument for solving this problem, but this instrument turned out to be very inconvenient. And she also proved to be a woman of courage: she held a solitary picket in Chechnya in support of human rights defenders who opposed Kadyrov. In her programming article, she explicitly called Crimea a source of problems for Russia for many years ahead. In the same article, she stated that Russia had no 'special path' to follow; it could only follow the general European way. At present, Sobchak also has her own clear path: she has all the chances to establish a party to play a game on the edge of the field after the elections (regardless of her result, which is unlikely to be impressive). She may attempt to supersede and finally bury Mikhail Kasyanov's PARNAS and take its modest place in order to calmly wait for a moment when the existence of her own party can be an important asset in the political game.

The miracles of taming and drilling

Let us go back to the issue of turnout. The parameters had been presented long before the campaign began: the Kremlin wanted at least 70% of Russians to go to the polls and also wanted at least 70% of those 70% to support Putin. Why is that?

Most probably, it is important for Putin to feel the support from his own country in a situation where his partners in international political confrontations simply cease to count on him; when they see him not as an equal partner but as a source of persistent problems. In those confrontations, it is also important for those counterparts to know that it is not just Putin but all of Russia that is in conflicts with them. It is important to show that Putin means Russia.

This is at least the spirit of statements that are being made, and yet they are very naive: for 15 years, if not longer, Russia's president needed no demonstrative support to take any political decisions, whether in foreign or domestic policy. International actors will nevertheless question the legitimacy of these elections and will highlight any news about violations and falsifications rather than the impressive turnout figures.

There is one provocative guessing game: what if the campaigning madness around the turnout is just an exciting sociological experiment? What if people at the Kremlin want to find out if it is possible to induce Russians to engage in meaningless actions upon an order, such as attend unexciting elections that have an easily predictable outcome?

If this proves to be possible, unimaginable prospects will open up for various other experiments with the Russian population.

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