

U.S. Election Offers Russians a Back Door to Criticizing Their Own System

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The 2020 U.S. presidential election was the subject of much discussion among the Russian public and was covered extensively by major official media. This high level of interest stands in sharp contrast to the Russian public's apparent low level of interest in several extremely consequential political events in Russia itself. The latter received only basic, limited coverage by media.

Among the notable events in 2020 was the referendum on amendments to the constitution in the last week of June, which extended President Putin's leasehold on his position. A couple of months later, on September 11–13, Russian citizens in eighty-three regions went to the polls to choose regional governors, parliaments, city mayors, and deputies to regional and municipal legislative bodies; in total, there were 156,000 candidates' names on the ballots. In addition, by-elections to the Russian State Duma took place in four constituencies. All of those were treated as ordinary news items. So were neighboring Belarus's presidential election and the ensuing mass protests.

Another unplanned political event in Russia that brought an outraged response from outside Russia was the poisoning of Alexey Navalny in Tomsk in August 2020. Navalny and his team had gone there to visit some local election sites and test a new voting tactic ("smart voting") that could help overcome the dominance of United Russia in the local legislatures. Both the Belarus elections and of the poisoning of Navalny were discussed extensively on Russian social media platforms but garnered only a few mentions in official media.

The U.S. Presidential Election

As fall 2020 wore on, the U.S. presidential elections and the events leading up to President Joe Biden's January 2021 inauguration took top place in public debates in Russia. Discussions on social media and even in public venues by ordinary citizens and people who otherwise would seem to be far removed from politics (especially world politics) matched and even exceeded commentary from high officials and official media's dense coverage.

One strong opinion, presumably sanctioned by the Kremlin, came from Speaker of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin. In opening the tenth session of the Duma on January 19, 2021, Volodin devoted almost seventeen minutes of his twenty-one-minute-long speech to the U.S. presidential election and just four minutes to the upcoming work of the Duma. Volodin pointed to the "archaic" nature of the U.S. election system, its distance from ordinary people, and possible electoral fraud through mail-in and absentee ballot voting. He accused the United States of failing at democracy by denying recognition of the rights of the 74 million Americans who voted for Trump. He claimed that blocking Trump's account on Facebook and Twitter was a gross violation of human rights and free speech.

In Volodin's opinion, the decision to ban Trump was made outside the democratic system and the ban was put in place by monopolistic corporations going around the court system—another proof, he said, that the U.S. system was undemocratic. The bottom line of his speech was that the United States had completely lost the moral right

to prescribe democracy to anyone or to present any standards on human rights, and should be stopped from interfering in the politics of any country.

Why Talking about the U.S. Presidency and Political System Mattered

This lengthy disquisition on the United States not being a true democracy drew on a well-established trope in Russian official discourse. What is interesting, however, is that the Russian public discussed the U.S. presidential election with an enthusiasm and engagement not seen in discussions of Russia's own political events. The topics of discussion included the U.S. electoral system and its weaknesses and unsuitability to modern situations, the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates, methods of tabulating votes and the potential for fraud, the storming of the Capitol, and the upcoming inauguration.

These debates produced many internet memes. Many Russians openly expressed their preference for Trump over Biden, talking about the latter as too old and infirm to serve the country, and certainly anti-Russian. Trump, by contrast, was often valorized as a sincere, open, and active politician, doing exactly what he had promised and being good for the economy. Another well-established line of argument was that he did not initiate any wars during his time in office, in contrast to his Democratic predecessor, and that he had improved relations with Russia. Many of these claims are far from reality, though it was difficult to parry them effectively. It seems almost ridiculous, but just a few days before the U.S. presidential election I came across the same opinions expressed by a representative of the FSB, the Russia's main security agency.

On the one hand, this high interest to the American presidential election could be a result of official media's influence on the public. Official media coverage of the U.S. election and the events around it is reminiscent of the Soviet tradition of criticizing an imperfect, rotten West and of official Soviet media paying much greater attention to international rather than domestic politics. Certainly it might represent an effort to divert people's attention from the contemporary political and social problems at home and to claim moral superiority over a political opponent such as the United States.

On the other hand, the elaborate, often emotional discussions of the U.S. presidential election might have served as a proxy for discussing the politics and politicians of Russia. People talked about the problems of aging politicians who are distant from the people and not suitable for the job, the fault lines in an electoral system, ways to commit electoral fraud, and the need for change.

For many Russians, discussing the American presidential election seems to be the only available option to indirectly criticize the domestic system and to express opinions in an open, fearless, and emotionally engaged manner—something they cannot do with respect to Russian national politics and Russia's existing political system, including its electoral system.

For the authorities the critique of U.S. politics may be a psychological defense mechanism, in which persons deny the existence of a problem in themselves, while attributing it to others instead.