

Why Would the Kremlin Root for Bernie Sanders?

MISTRUST OF MASS POLITICS AND THE OUTWARD PROJECTION OF DOMESTIC INSECURITIES

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 639

March 2020

Viatcheslav Morozov¹

University of Tartu

The U.S. intelligence community seems to believe that Russia has intervened and continues to intervene in American elections on behalf of both President Donald Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders. No hard proof of those allegations is available in the public domain. The February 21 [report](#) about the alleged Russian interference in support of Sanders's campaign for the presidential nomination was thin on details and, [for many people](#), not particularly convincing. This memo is written on the assumption that such interference is possible, even though its scale and effectiveness are probably low.

Regardless of one's opinion about the fact of interference, it is useful to reconstruct the reasoning behind the Kremlin's attitude to the presidential contenders. Attitudes to Sanders are particularly revealing, reflecting a range of stereotypes and misperceptions not just about the United States, but about the nature of politics in general. These misperceptions are exacerbated by the Kremlin's domestic concerns over regime survival, which take precedence over any foreign policy considerations. In the final analysis, Russian elites' view of Sanders is motivated by their own deep distrust of mass politics and their own related preference for "stability" and technocratic governance.

Sowing Discord?

Some of Sanders's [conservative opponents](#) believe that Moscow supports him because of certain political moves he is promising, such as cutting down on military spending or a ban on fracking. While Russia might indeed stand to benefit from some of the policies that Sanders is likely to implement if he gets elected, it is hardly possible to expect that the overall balance would be in Moscow's favor. If anything, the history of U.S.-Russian relations under the Trump administration must have taught Moscow not to put high hopes on personalities. Even as Trump is probably less concerned about Russia's activities in Ukraine, his administration has introduced new sanctions and has been more assertive

¹ [Viatcheslav Morozov](#) is Professor of EU-Russia Studies at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

in its Middle East policies than many people might have expected. Such well informed pro-Kremlin pundits as [Fyodor Lukyanov](#) do not expect any improvement in U.S.-Russian relations regardless of the outcome of this year's campaigns.

For the same reasons, the expectation that Sanders as a presidential candidate would be too radical to defeat Trump could hardly be seen by the Kremlin as a strong incentive to support the former. Opinions within the Russian elite vary, but overall Moscow's preference for Trump is marginal at most: he is seen as too chaotic and unpredictable, and the security risks that such unpredictability might involve are not lost on the Kremlin.

Why Moscow might indeed prefer another Trump presidency is because it sees him as generating chaos and discord in U.S. domestic politics. Sanders's nomination is seen as the optimal outcome of the democratic primaries on exactly the same grounds. According to many Russian observers, a contest between the two candidates located at the two opposite ends of the spectrum would lead to further polarization and political strife. If, contrary to the expectations prevailing in Russia, Sanders happens to defeat Trump, his radical policies will be rejected by a large part of the American population. This, the argument goes, will lead to even more conflict and ultimately weaken democratic institutions. At the very least, it will be distractive enough to reduce Washington's capability of applying pressure on Moscow. Following the same logic, the Russian propaganda machine will be certain to capitalize on any news suggesting manipulation on the part of the Democratic Party leadership aimed at preventing Sanders from winning the nomination.

"We Know What's Worst for You"

Such an interpretation of the Kremlin's reasoning is of course [nothing new](#): it has been widely discussed in the U.S. media ever since the 2016 campaign. At the same time, the belief that Sanders's election is likely to destabilize the United States is by no means self-evident: he does, after all, enjoy strong [support among American voters](#), especially younger ones. Even if his views might be classified as radical for the United States, they would be pretty much mainstream even in today's capitalist Russia. After all, Russia is a country where health care, despite all its multiple problems, remains free for all legal residents, while the pension system, even as the age of retirement is being increased, remains comprehensive and largely state-run. President Vladimir Putin has initiated a number of state-subsidized schemes to support families with children, and access to public-funded education, up to the doctoral level, is open to everyone on the basis of merit.

Most of these public schemes are legacies of the Soviet system, but it would seem that most Russians take their availability for granted. Putin's regime has made multiple attempts at trimming down social guarantees, but many such steps have faced formidable resistance on the part of the population, as during the 2005 benefits reform and the 2018

pension reform. While seeking to “rationalize” the social state, the Russian leadership has to put up with the fact that it is popular with its own citizens. Putin himself has just [proposed](#) to inscribe a number of social guarantees in the Russian Constitution, in an apparent attempt to secure support for his package of wider constitutional reforms.

If such apparently “socialist” measures are popular in Russia and to a large extent serve as a pivot of political stability, why would the Russian leadership expect a much more moderate program to have a disruptive effect on the other side of the Atlantic? Do the Russian political elites see American people’s values and expectations as qualitatively different from those of Russians and therefore incompatible with anything socialist? A careful analysis of Russian reactions to Sanders’s success at the early stage of the primaries suggests that the opposite is true: there is an underlying belief that Americans and Russians are essentially the same. It is not the content of Sanders’s political program that determines the perception of Sanders as a dangerous radical. Rather, what is seen as potentially disruptive is the type of politics that he offers by appealing directly to the people, and in particular by mobilizing the younger generation of voters.

To begin with, Russian observers often look down on Americans as a nation that has not experienced socialism first-hand and hence is not mature enough not to be seduced by Sanders’s promises of a “brilliant future.” The veteran pro-Kremlin pundit [Andranik Migranyan](#) issues a stark warning: “We collapsed into nothing because of Communism, and now this is the dream that Sanders is offering—and a big part of your country is following him into the abyss.” On the liberal Echo of Moscow radio station, the conversation about the U.S. campaign [keeps returning](#) to a point about American youth, people “of a romantic age” who “have been infected with socialism,” who “do not remember that socialism does not work,” do not know “what socialism really is,” and thus want “everything for free.”

For Putin loyalists and critics of the Kremlin alike, the significance of the young age of many Sanders supporters goes far beyond electoral analysis: it is the central point in their assessment of his prospects both as a candidate and as a future head of state. The defining notion in this assessment is immaturity: Sanders’s constituency is depicted as inexperienced, naïve, and hence prone to accept the promises of the “crazy professor” at face value. The speakers, on the contrary, are able to claim adult authority by implying a richer collective historical experience and its presumably correct interpretation. Loyalists would then proceed to argue that Sanders is the best nominee for Russia, whereas liberals would view the alleged immaturity of the U.S. public with consternation and even dismay.

The liberally-minded part of the Russian public would also tend to believe the allegations that the Kremlin is supporting Sanders. This group generally shows more respect for U.S. state agencies, but most importantly, it sees Sanders’s socialism as particularly dangerous

for U.S. democracy. Hence, it would see greater gains for the Kremlin in providing such support, and find the whole scenario more plausible.

Stability vs. Renewal

With a few exceptions, the ascription of infantilism to Sanders's supporters is not based on any genuine knowledge of U.S. realities. Rather, it is an outward projection of Russian elites' positioning vis-à-vis their own people. As such, it is a legacy of the anti-egalitarian attitudes of the late Soviet intelligentsia, whose anti-socialist disposition spilled over into a profound distrust towards the masses and any forms of mass politics. This position is epitomized by one of the symbols of that epoch, Vladimir Bortko's 1988 screen adaptation of *Heart of a Dog*, a novel by Mikhail Bulgakov. By [accentuating](#) Bulgakov's portrayal of Professor Preobrazhensky as desperately defending civility against Bolshevik barbarianism, represented by the despicable characters of the lowly Sharikov and the communist fanatic Shvonder, Bortko created a meme that remains popular to this day.

The elitist mindset later solidified in the sociological concept of the Soviet person, or *Homo Sovieticus* – a type of personality allegedly cultivated by Soviet totalitarianism and characterized by paternalistic expectations and pathological incapacity for independent thinking and conduct. Despite being sharply criticized by critically-minded scholars both [in Russia](#) and [abroad](#), sociologists from institutions like the Levada Center continue to advance the concept of the Soviet personality as the explanation for the predominance of authoritarian tendencies in Russian politics. Arguably, the belief that the Russian people are not mature enough to take their destiny into their own hands is a major source of legitimacy for Putin's regime, which often presents itself as the only force capable of bringing order to an otherwise unruly Russia.

It is easy to see how this distrust of the masses is projected on U.S. politics. According to this logic, technocratic governance by a group of enlightened intellectuals is always preferable to a genuine democracy that gives power to the people. The latter are prone to all sorts of totalitarian illusions: they would "want everything for free," which makes them easy to manipulate. Domestically, Russian leaders are particularly afraid of the recent sharp increase in the share of young people among anti-government protesters. While accusing the West of trying to destroy Russia by subverting gullible youth, the Kremlin is eager to pay it back by investing in its own propaganda machine. The more liberally-minded groups in Russia's intelligentsia would denounce these efforts as "promotion of authoritarianism," but many of them would still share the distrust of mass politics and thus the view that such manipulation is easy and dangerous.

Conclusion

Assuming the above analysis is correct, it invites an unsettling question: could the same distrust of mass politics be the driving force behind the concerns about possible Russian

interference also on the part of U.S. elites? Could it be that those accusing Sanders of being convenient for the Kremlin are so worried mostly because they do not trust their own people, especially young people, to make independent and mature political choices? This is in itself a political question, and I am not going to attempt answering it in this memo. It is, however, crucial to emphasize that even if the Kremlin might prefer Sanders over all other Democratic candidates, this has nothing to do with his socialist standing as such.

Russia's pro-Putin elites see any mass political mobilization as a threat, and any unsanctioned political activity by young people as particularly dangerous. When they say that Sanders's nomination is likely to produce "chaos," they have in mind galvanization of voters and an increase in all forms of political participation. There is no doubt that any escalation of political tension could end in a destabilization, but the opposite of stability is not just chaos but renewal. If there is a lesson to be learned from Putin's Russia, it is that sacrificing democratic renewal for the sake of stability leads to stagnation.