

# “Populists Are Now Lying Less Than ‘Systemic Politicians’”

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*Is the topic of populism relevant to modern Russia? Can our conditions produce the phenomenon that is currently observed in Europe and the United States, and is generally spreading around the world? And is it not time to abandon the model based on political parties? These issues were discussed at a roundtable held in the office of the Russia in Global Affairs journal and attended by Yuri VASILYEV, Gleb KUZNETSOV, Vitaly LEIBIN and Oleg KHARKHORDIN. Fyodor LUKYANOV, Russia in Global Affairs editor-in-chief, moderated the discussion.*

**Fyodor LUKYANOV:** Is the phenomenon which in Western discourse is commonly referred to as populism inherent in modern Russia? I think we have the same conditions that have spurred social activity in Europe and the United States, including among those sections of society which previously were extremely passive. First of all, it is the feeling of alienation on the part of the authorities. On the other hand, Russia has a completely different situation and a different political model. Should we expect to see comparable processes?

**Gleb KUZNETSOV:** Populism has been and remains quite relevant to us. Actually, we probably were a sort of trend setters in this respect. In his new book *Identity* Francis Fukuyama talks about prominent leaders of the new era, an era of populism, and defines populism as a regime that relies on popular support and opposes the establishment’s concoctions with popular wisdom and popular tradition. He puts Vladimir Putin on a par with Donald Trump or even considers him his precursor. And as right-wing European populists and critics of populism are trying to assess the current developments, both turn to the Russian leader’s experience.

“Populists Are Now Lying Less Than ‘Systemic Politicians’”



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**LUKYANOV:** The way I see it, populism boils down mainly to speculation about the alienation of the ruling class from the people and more generally to certain awareness that there is “a people” which it has to address; to a direct appeal to those sections of the population that were passive or were ignored; and to an outburst of society’s activity, including in the previously “dormant” strata, in response to the sensed hubris of the authorities. Could such an interpretation be applied to Putin?

**KUZNETSOV:** It could. It is easy to see that restoring the nation’s self-esteem was the “nerve center” of Putin’s policy during his first few terms. He fought the oligarchy, the establishment that had seized all the wealth. He was building the vertical of state power in the interests of the people. In his speech after the Beslan tragedy, he repeatedly accentuated the idea that the tightening of legislation and political regime was necessary because it was impossible to ensure the interests and security of people in a situation where the state had been privatized by a bunch of “bad guys” in the 1990s. There is no doubt that the reincorporation of Crimea was the culmination of that movement. His Crimean speech, which furnished the ideological framework for these events, contained constant references to the soul of the people, the historical memory of the people, the sacred places of the people, and the elite’s betrayal (transfer of Crimea into Ukraine’s jurisdiction by Khrushchev).

This is a system of arguments that is used by all leaders of the right-wing populist wave: Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Victor Orban, Marine Le Pen, and the Poles. Putin looks like the “founder of the tradition,” who made the “revival of the nation’s spirit” the main political trend for decades.

But all this is in the past now. In my opinion, Russia is no longer pregnant with right-wing populism, but with a left-wing one, as there is a huge demand for social justice, with poverty being the main reason for discontent. More-



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over, poverty is not understood as “there is not enough money today,” but rather as “there is never enough money.” A new type of poverty is emerging, which characterizes a person’s mindset rather than his financial status. This causes protest and aggression among people who still believe in the Soviet myth of a caring state. This explains why any sermon on social justice directed against the elite unexpectedly becomes so popular. The Shies Station protests were just camouflaging as ecological ones which they never were. Likewise, the protests in Yekaterinburg were directed not against the clerics but against oligarchs. Events in Moscow this past summer were of the same sort. An increase in the number of votes cast for the Communist Party in the Moscow elections came as a surprise to me. It seemed that an alliance of pensioners and hipsters had no chance of success, but it suddenly materialized. The pendulum has swung, and now society is increasingly eyeing the left-wing populist model through which to perceive reality. “We don’t need a job, we need a salary. We don’t need bridges and gas pipelines. Just give us privileges and money, please. You have them, don’t you?”

**LUKYANOV:** A gloomy picture. We are moving from a developed kind of political perversion to an undeveloped kind of political perversion. It used to be, “We are like successful countries,” and now it is more like “We are like Brazil or Latin America.” Is this really so?

**KUZNETSOV:** Neither is perversion. I think populism is today’s mainstream, a new daily form of political existence. Technology provides easy access to both information and public expression of opinion. The middle class is on the decline from Chile to Europe and from Chicago to Yekaterinburg. These are the reasons. People are looking for answers, but instead are finding something else, realizing that their interests are not represented, they are neglected, they become gripped by the feeling of resentment, and see injustice in the distribution of wealth. Have you

noticed that protests this past summer and this fall, essentially left-wing in nature, simultaneously took place in Hong Kong, Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, Catalonia, Moscow, and Lebanon? Different as they are in formal reasons, they had a lot in common in terms of emotions and demands to the authorities. Slightly before that “yellow vests” protests shook France for pretty much the same reasons. The world is global, and Russia is part of it.

Lukyanov: If it is legitimate to talk about the rise of populist sentiment with high-sounding claims for redistribution, what kind of populism can respond to it: left-wing, right-wing conservative, or some other? For example, Alexey Navalny would be quite a classical European populist if he were in that political and institutional environment. He clearly identifies and highlights issues that cut to the heart. Nowadays he is talking about corruption, but there was a nationalist touch before.

**KUZNETSOV:** Navalny must be either completely left-wing or completely right-wing. What makes populism so distinct is that it requires “final solutions” and a very clear and distinct position. It is not enough to just say that you stand up for justice; you need to point out where it is. Populists understand justice as distribution of benefits, excluding “the stranger” from the process. For right-wing populists “the stranger” is an alien, a foreigner, a migrant. For left-wing populists “the stranger” is an oligarch, a bourgeois, a moneybag. But an alien element, the “enemy” in the completely Schmittian sense, must be designated and publicly combated.

**Vitaly LEIBIN:** The problem of populism in modern Russia can be understood as follows: conceptual content is gone from public discussions. The most significant dispute we have heard about the Moscow protests is the cloying polemics between uncritical Westernism and a meaningless but pragmatic ideology of stability. There is not even the slightest sign of any left-wing ideas with the strong tradition and foundation laid down last century. What we call populism is just a symptom indicating that the ideological and partisan content has been emasculated. Pragmatic and concrete issues of internal life in the country can be discussed without theories and concepts, but they are not discussed either.

A couple of years ago, I spoke with a vice-governor of one of the rich regions, and he said: “You in Moscow have obviously gone off your rocker. All channels keep talking about Ukraine and Syria, while we here are trying

to attract investments and open new factories. But how are we supposed to discuss this with people if a war can break out tomorrow?” The entire meaningful internal agenda of the government has been reduced to the promotion of national projects. The authorities are worrying that no one knows about them. But the problem is not in poor promotion, but in the fact that national projects contain separate measures, but lack ideology and substantive policy. No one is discussing truly crucial issues. Why has there been virtually no economic growth for more than a decade? Why is Moscow pouring money into sidewalks while other regions are drowning in mud? Why is only the defense budget growing, while education and health expenditures are “optimized” even when there is surplus revenue? There are many interesting topics, and sound positions would certainly be found with regard to them if there were an internal debate. But there is none because the authorities are afraid of criticism. This is why their rhetoric is sheer populism, just a story of what people would like to hear.

The other side of populism is uncritical Westernism, an “ideology of democracy” based on the fact that part of society does not remember that this ideology once was a ruling one but generally unproductive. Take, for example, the events in Yekaterinburg: the protest rhetoric was so sharp that it scared the whole city, both those who were in favor of the cathedral and those who were against it. They were frightened of how easily they could all slide into hatred and foolish imitation of “democratic” protests around the world. Populist (in the sense of uncritical) revolutionary and Maidan-like mobilization is possible only, as our friends in Yekaterinburg say, if “our liberal friends have a fish’s memory” (they do not remember the 1990s and are not aware of events in Ukraine and of other “color revolutions”).

But then neither statist nor the state itself want people to have a memory either. They want discussions to be safe and sterile. Practically no internal issues are discussed on federal television channels, and so the only conceptual content that exists is geopolitical. It’s very specific, but it does exist.

**LUKYANOV:** Stings to the quick? Syria is a separate issue. But does Ukraine still sell?

**LEIBIN:** It does sting, but at the same time the absence of domestic agenda is quite irritating. However, this “stinging” is obviously different from what we had before the “pension reform.”

**Yuri VASILYEV:** When domestic geopolitics is discussed, the idea of territorial development gets across very well. For example, a region gets a new leader who can win people's trust. This may be accompanied by multi-billion investment programs of public-private partnership, social development, and support for enterprises that provide jobs. If a program is convincing, important, and backed with concrete actions of the head of the region, geopolitics works very well, and the governor receives a cosmic 90 percent even though he may have only 40 percent a year later.

**Oleg KHARKHORDIN:** I think the current model of populism in Russia resembles the Brazilian or even the Argentine one in the 1970s and 1980s; for example, the populism of Peronists who resist the pressure from the military junta, that is, populism as some sort of protest within an authoritarian regime. How is that possible? Populism of the classical Latin American type survived owing to trade unions and Lula da Silva, a trade union populist figure who eventually came to power. There is no strong institution of trade unions in Russia, but we can draw another parallel, perhaps not a very justified one—the masses. Annoyance with elites can be redirected from corruption to the lack of political freedom. I agree that Navalny was probably a right-wing populist at first when he said that Crimea was not “a sausage sandwich to be passed back and forth,” but now has become rather left-wing. He is a networker who canalizes discontent, but this movement will not be effective without an institutional structure.

**LUKYANOV:** Is Navalny able to create an institutional base at all? Or is he just a symbol?

**LEIBIN:** The internal agenda has been substantively emasculated since both sides of the political conflict—protectors of the state and systemic pro-Western opposition—benefit from cartoonish demonization of each other. It is clear why this is important for the stability of power—any meaningful opponent can be marked as belonging to the non-systemic opposition, and his views thus discredited in the eyes of the majority.

For example, a person who criticizes any policy (such as law enforcement) can be labeled in the same field Navalny is in. This denies him an opportunity to work to improve this policy as he is perceived by it as an enemy, even though he considers himself a patriot and is ready to work towards gradual reform and remedy certain faults. This is in the interests of not so much

the authorities as specific groups in power: they are beyond criticism as "friends," but those who criticize are "foes." By designating any meaningful critic as a member of the non-systemic opposition, you thereby protect all participants in the process from reprehension and garner mass support. The authorities support them not because they pursue effective domestic policies, but because they oppose the collective West and the collective "liberals" who are leading the country towards another revolution and instability.

**LUKYANOV:** "Mr Dragon has rid us of gypsies."

**LEIBIN:** Exactly. But such a strategy on the part of the authorities benefits non-systemic leaders, including Navalny, as well, because it is the lack of adequate reaction and demonization of the protectors of the state that leads to the mobilization of a small but active minority. If a meaningful discussion started in this field, there would be a divergence of views within the opposition on different issues, such as migrants. Once a substantive discussion begins, it will be impossible to mobilize "the entire protest potential" and the entire opposition. It will be difficult to portray either the supporters of the state or the opponents of revolutions solely as thieves and sadists, as both will reveal sincere and humanistic views. Both sides of the political conflict benefit from the emasculation of the discussion and, in this sense, from populism.

**LUKYANOV:** Is such a category as patriotism of any significance today? I don't mean television shows and propaganda, but people define their attitude towards politicians or public figures in terms of "being a patriot" or "not being a patriot?"

**KUZNETSOV:** Everyone is a patriot nowadays: both those who have been sentenced in the "Moscow case" and those who are guarding them. I read carefully the "final pleas" of the accused in different trials. They spoke of their patriotism quite sincerely. There are no non-patriots today. Some say that "you love your homeland only because it pays you for this love," and others retort with "You probably don't understand or you may be conscious enemies, who disguise themselves as patriots while actually playing into a foreign enemy's pocket. You are paid too, not by your own country, but by those who are against it." In other words, in the political sense, the concept of "patriotism" has lost its meaning as a factor that divides people into them and us.

**KHARKHORDIN:** It is necessary to distinguish between a phenomenon and its marker, that is, between a concept and a phenomenon proper. Classical dissident intellectuals with globalist rhetoric systemically make up a substantial portion of opposition circles. And the fact that the opposition does not go along with the regime but is a permanent ally of the West allows the protectors of the state to label globalists as non-patriots.

**LEIBIN:** The point is that the marker here is not patriotism, but the attitude towards radical regime change. "Are you for the Orange Revolution or against it?" The opposition may characterize an attempt to change the regime by bringing people to the streets as patriotic and peaceful protests, but for the conservative majority, the silent majority, it is a marker of an enemy which was already seen in 1991 and 1993 in Russia and twice in Ukraine. And this enemy is encroaching upon the very foundations of life and is ready to destroy the country. The middle class in regions criticizes the internal policy of the government and prefers democracy and fair elections, but it is suspicious of protests in Moscow for fear that they may lead to another revolution and a collapse of the country. Yekaterinburg was frightened by how fast the protest was radicalizing.

**LUKYANOV:** In other words, the West remains a dividing marker?

**LEIBIN:** The demarcation line runs between these two approaches: "The West will help us" and "The West is a strategic opponent."

**KHARKHORDIN:** This is intended for intellectuals. In individual focus groups involving ordinary citizens, you can see demand for change. Sometimes it is not very explicit and is formulated this way: "It must be a fair play. That's the most important thing." There is no mention of the West, by and large. The main message is that it is necessary to play fair in Russia.

**KUZNETSOV:** A person lives in a provincial town, runs a small business, and has to pay 80,000 rubles a year for changing the cash register. Olga Golodets said we were a unique case in world history and called it "working poverty." I'll tell you more: we also have entrepreneurial poverty. That is, a small entrepreneur in a province is planned to be poor all along. And these people, and in fact they are the core of the conservative majority, are already starting to think... Not that they are waiting for a pro-American administration to come and outlaw cash registers. No, they are just starting to reflect. And here comes the same populist question: "Maybe the state



does not care so much about small business? Maybe it’s not with us?” And this is what comes as an answer: “Probably, they simply do not know up there what injustice we have to face down here on the ground.”

We did not start by defining populism. Populism arises when a significant part of the population believes that the institutions and the procedures they use do not serve its interests. That is, people are told: “We have democracy. There is an institution, you vote for it, it introduces procedures, and all this is done in your interests.” But people think, “Are these really my interests? No, they are not.” And this is how risks emerge. The state has recovered from the downfall in the nineties, proved its viability, but has become “heavy” with all forms of administration and regulation. But political and ideological administration is only a small part of general administration, and in fact people do not really feel it all that much. When a person looks at what is happening around (a teacher or a doctor who has to write a dozen reports after each steps he takes, or an entrepreneur who has to change the cash register once a year, and so on), they start to think that the procedures being imposed are bad, and therefore there is probably something wrong with the institutions, too. That’s the reason for our populist wave.

**VASILYEV:** Russian populism actualizes demand for justice. That’s exactly what it is, no more, but unfortunately, no less either. And what is most interesting here is how the state has responded to this demand. I did not take part in the street protests in Moscow, but I can share my observations from three years spent in regions. We can clearly see three models in the regions, three attempts to organize institutional structures to manage the demand for justice. Perhaps this is an attempt to canalize demand for justice in the right direction, meet it or skillfully deny it, take your pick. But there are three models of regional governance that have been consistently demonstrated in terms of demand for justice.

The year 2017 was a period of “green folders.” You are appointed as head of a region, you come to Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin-Ed.], and he says: “Here is your agenda. We have put it together for you. Please work on it.” The era of “green folders” was a time of governors who, in fact, were hired managers with clearly defined tasks.

The year 2018 was marked by demand for the so-called “new sincerity 1.0.” “New sincerity 1.0” means that you have been appointed. Great, you

can do anything, and there will be no green folders anymore. You lead the way. "Go meet the people! Talk to them, hear their complaints, and be at the tip of the spear. Once you get the feel of it, come here and we will think it over together." This principle is the opposite of the "green folders" approach. So, we see demand not for managers, but for those who can talk to people. These are mayors who should already have been around long enough to know the situation and all the details. This assumption is partly true and partly wrong. But this is how the question is put. This is why fairly good specialists are gone—they lost elections because they did not know how to communicate with people.

And now there is "new sincerity 2.0" to recruit true professionals. You may or may not have been born in the region and your previous occupation is irrelevant. What matters is your management skills. That's the first point. The second point is your ability to talk to people, but now your communication should solve two tasks. You have to get into the mind of every person living in places where the governor has not been seen since the time of developed socialism; and you have to find out who you are going to govern and what you are going to do. And then, in contrast to "new sincerity 1.0," you come here with substantiated requests, they are estimated, and you get the funding right way. The role of a governor now is very different from the first version: this is a "new sincerity" backed with funding. But funding differs from region to region. It can be just a small sum of a billion rubles for priority social welfare projects. You should look around and suggest how much needs to be invested, how development can be ensured, and what funding is required and where. In other words, roughly speaking, "new sincerity 2.0" is a working project office to meet the demand for justice.

So, the election results generally show that by and large this course was supported. There is demand for justice and attempts to meet this demand. We have discussed three models the state proposed. And it is quite possible that a successful model of development has already been found.

**LUKYANOV:** Going back to the previous point. What we are seeing in Europe or America in connection with the rise of populism is the destruction of the entire partisan system, apparently irreversible. It will never be the same. Great Britain is the most vivid example. There is no way to restore this two-and-a-half or bipartisan system. These are not Conservatives, these

are not the Labor, and those are not Liberals. Fortunately or unfortunately, we have no party system. Should we have it? Or should we forget about it?

**KHARKHORDIN:** I have a model. I don't know if the UK will follow this path, but the way French newspapers describe the fight against populism can be labeled as republicanism, that is, an alternative to liberalism. France had two kinds of populism—Scylla and Charybdis: the right represented by Le Pen, and the left personified by Jean-Luc Melenchon. And suddenly an alternative force emerged, knocking down both the traditional right and the traditional left—people from Emmanuel Macron's team, who had to create a whole party of minions out of thin air, just as Vladimir Zelensky is doing now. In fact, the only distinctive feature of this republicanism is the idea that “we will do what is necessary, and we will work hard.” Some may view populism as demand for justice when we just walk around like the “yellow vests,” wave posters and shout “Give us freedom and happiness.” But the guys from Macron's team think differently: “Well, if you pledge, don't hedge and do something. You need to take part in determining the rules of life that is possible.”

I am not sure that the erosion of the UK's left-wing and right-wing parties will follow the French model, but the formation of “amorphous” parties which can offer a new agenda could become an alternative to populism. I'm not saying they will last long. Polarization is inevitable in Zelensky's party, and it is not clear what will happen to it in the near future. And we have to wait and see what is going to happen to the French now that Macron has lost most of his support. From the point of view of classical republicanism, parties are not needed if they are part of representative democracy, that is, a system of political representation. But the party system is good as the established way of formalizing group interests. Nothing else has been invented over the past two hundred years. It is still more convenient to drink from a cup than from cupped hands.

I can see no alternative to populism in our country as a coherent desire of people to govern themselves, except for a municipal urge among the guys who need a garden where to walk dogs and children, or different Moscow municipal movements, or people who protect themselves from urban densification or landfill sites near their homes.

**LUKYANOV:** Judging from what you've just said, even if the existing system were replaced with new parties or other forms of organization, they

would no longer be ideological. Speaking of us, where should we move in our development? The latest events in the West show that ideological parties—a 200-year-old legacy —are disappearing.

**KUZNETSOV:** Modernity is over, and so is the era of ideological parties. But there is one point. We cannot escape the existing political architecture, not so much a division into the left and the right as parliament, representative democracy and so on. When you build a house, you need to write volumes of documentation according to certain rules. So we can keep on saying that the construction rules are a century old and none of them is relevant any longer today, which is true, but, like it or not, there is no way to abolish political parties simply because they are already out of date. This is how the state works. In order to scrap the old system and the principles of representation, it is necessary to create “project documentation,” determine a large number of new frameworks and put them in place. So this process is not fast, and probably even endless, like all “repairs.” (I’ll probably stick to the construction metaphor.) And we should not rush things. A transition from one to another is always very risky in terms of stability.

**VASILYEV:** We can observe an interesting trend this year. One of the political parties (let’s not name it) has assumed full responsibility for the pension reform not because it wanted but because it had no choice. Over the past year, changes have been made to the regulations of many regional parliaments to replace party lists (the bulk of party work) with a single-member constituency system. In some places, candidates from single-member constituencies make up one-half of the regional parliament, and in some places they hold two-thirds of the seats. So, this is a forced trend. The network will remain, but it will have to make concessions and nominate individuals in its own interests. The same, I think, will happen to the party, which will be not so much ideological as “Do you see, guys, whom we are nominating, what for and in what spheres?”

**LUKYANOV:** Does the role of personality becomes important or not, at the federal level?

**VASILYEV:** In fact, if we are talking about ways to manage demand for justice, on the one hand, and ways to govern the state as a whole, on the other, if we recognize the need for any change in a given sphere (and take note of the fact that at some levels changes occur by new model every

year), we must also recognize that every successful revolution in Russia was always started from above. Because we know what happens when it is done any other way. So, the role of personality at the highest federal level undoubtedly is of great significance. I would even say, ultimatum-like significance, because it is necessary not only to carry out the chosen policy, but also hold the situation under control.

**LUKYANOV:** Zelensky is just an emblem, a brand, at least for now. Does anyone need such an emblem?

**KUZNETSOV:** Populism is always simplistic, the magic of simple solutions, and magic needs a magician. There can be no magic tricks without a magician. Here he comes and solves everything—“Trump Digs Coal,” so to speak. There where there is an interesting personality sold in an absolutely commercial sense, there is the charm of the populist wave.

Why is it interesting to watch the UK now? Because they are making a much more talented clown out of Johnson than he—an Oxford aristocrat by birth—actually is. What for? Because Johnson can no longer be sold to society at the level of public flamboyance to which England is used, roughly speaking, the level of David Cameron or Theresa May.

**LUKYANOV:** And what about Zelensky? Is he a model or not?

**KUZNETSOV:** A model, but not the only one. There are a lot of models, and each of them is funny and interesting in its own way. Thierry Baudet, the new face of Dutch populism, says in every speech: “I don’t want to please anyone, I don’t want to be modern, I’m a man of the past.” There is also Matteo Salvini, the Spanish have come up with some interesting types; Melenchon, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others.

**KHARKHORDIN:** According to Max Weber’s theory, plebiscitary democracy can only exist when at one end there are populist masses demanding “Give us everything” and not wanting to do anything in politics, at the other end there is a leader, and in-between there is bureaucracy and local higher-ups, who must be squeezed by the pressure of the masses from below and the actions of the leader from above. In this case, a charismatic leader is a necessity.

**LEIBIN:** As far as Zelensky is concerned, Ukraine seems to have long become an example of international political innovations. What we are witnessing is the “Ukrainization of world politics.” Condemnation of criminal power, not only of a concrete president or concrete party, but of any body of power

in general, disrespect for institutions—this was not characteristic of American politics. No matter how hard the election struggle might have been, the winning president was respected by opponents as president, and competitors shook hands with each other and distinguished the institution of presidency from the concrete rascal holding this position. The Ukrainian (actually characteristic of countries with a weak state, but strong competitive democracy) habit of calling their government criminal, always and totally, appeared in the United States only with election of Trump. Another innovation, the latest one, is recruiting leaders in the virtual space. Zelensky has taken a completely new step because he was not originally “President Zelensky,” but “President Goloborodko,” a sitcom character. This is quite an interesting phenomenon for philosophical reflection. If this is populism, it’s an entirely new type—a leader of virtual reality, a dream-world. The United States has knocked on these doors many times with Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, “Terminator and California Governor.” And yet, they were elected as actors, not as characters from their films. Only one weak but democratic, experimental and desperate country, drowned in virtual reality, has been able to tear down the border between fiction and the real world. This path is now open.

**LUKYANOV:** This is what a magician actually does. He creates reality.

**LEIBIN:** It is interesting to talk about populism in terms of both its realism and honesty. It is believed that populism is a deception, that serious politicians propose serious reforms, while populists promise impossible but pleasant things. That’s definitely not the case now. Ironically, populists are now lying less than systemic politicians. I firmly believe that some of the slogans used by a politician can tell you exactly when he is not lying. In fact, politicians must be liked by people and say only pleasant things, that is, lie one way or another to some extent. But sometimes they say things that will definitely not be liked by a considerable part of society. And when they do so, they definitely don’t lie.

For example, during his election campaign Trump talked a lot about fighting migrants and building a wall with Mexico. And it appears now that he didn’t lie. The tightening of migration regulations, concentration camps for illegal migrants and the wall under construction are the proof. Why don’t politicians lie in such cases? Because they sacrifice part of their electorate for the sake of their declarations. If they say something risky, it means that

they need it really badly either in order to mobilize their supporters, or because they sincerely believe in it. In either case, they will try to deliver on their promises.

When our Ukrainian friends shouted “Those who do not hop up and down are Moskals,” many did not believe it and tried to convince us that it was just a game, a show of populism, and that the protesters and their leaders wanted to drive oligarchs away and achieve prosperity. However, oligarchs are still there, prosperity is nowhere in sight, Moskals really get killed, and the Russian language has been banned everywhere except private conversations.

Populists do what they pledge. The more controversial things they promise, the more accurately they will do them. If Navalny says that he will close down the border with Central Asia, there is no doubt that migrants will be affected when he comes to power.

But in the case of Zelensky nothing like that has been said. A virtual populist says nothing; a character speaks for him. He scores the overwhelming majority of votes without making any promises or offending anyone.

Perhaps all populists, including ours, dream of this. Most Russian election races with only one candidate running follow a pattern that spin doctors used to call “a shit and steam campaign,” meaning that its sole purpose is to improve communal services. True, there are some minor things that need improvement. But this kind of populism de-ideologizes the campaign: “Trust real actions”—opposition candidates cannot fix the pipes, so let them jog on with all their ideologies. However, if an opposition candidate succeeds in imposing an attractive and meaningful agenda and finding a real conflict in society, he will beat the gray “shit and steam” campaign.

Zelensky has another, more perfect, instrument of victory. There is no mobilization of supporters because all are supporters. You can promise anything without the need to take sides in a conflict. “We are not going to divide a pie; we are going to add more layers to it.” Apparently, this is a new, modern model. Ukraine is an unfortunate country, but in terms of political innovations it has gone far ahead of others.

**LUKYANOV:** Going back to the parties. Presumably, they are somehow unopposed, but the conditions for their existence change dramatically.

**KUZNETSOV:** Civic activism is a very important factor. Speaking of Europe, socialists unexpectedly won elections in Spain. Unlike their opponents who built their campaign around declarations that they had saved Spain as a unified state, socialists spoke of civic activism, comfortable life, and the absence of sovereignty issues. They said: “Let the police carry out police functions, but sovereignty cannot be a problem for us Spaniards. We want to have schools and hospitals, shorter queues, and comfortable life in Spain.” There is a hierarchy of problems everywhere. Some need a world revolution, and others (and this is also a kind of world revolution), a comfortable life within their municipality. Why are they against Catalan independence? Because Catalonia’s independence creates difficulties for municipal development.

**LUKYANOV:** In 2017, before the elections in Germany, there was a discussion on the new world order, and someone came up with an interesting thought, which surprised me quite a bit at that time. He claimed that young people allegedly were not eager to go into politics and join non-governmental organizations, but opted for business startups because politics is generally an outdated topic. What can non-governmental organizations do? You’d better start your own small business, build it up, and so on. It surprised me back then. But now I am wondering if this could be a trend.

**KUZNETSOV:** It’s the other way round in Spain. All leaders of nationalist regionalists (Majorca, Asturias, etc.) are well over forty. They are “elderly.” All leaders of major parties, both mainstream and populist ones, are about forty years old, and everyone has a nickname like Beautiful, Gorgeous and so on. I think there is a division of Europe into northern, harsh and working, and southern with those who like to talk and argue—Mediterranean people. Politics for them is also a kind of startup.

**LUKYANOV:** So, what is happening to democracy in the context of our discussion? Is an election just an act of shopping in a supermarket with or without a selection of goods?

**VASILYEV:** If there is no selection, there is no purchasing. If there were no elections, our superiors would not have fought so eagerly in the last war. And the last war was the regional campaign of 2018, when I think four candidates from the ruling party lost for various reasons, but mainly due to the lack of interaction with people and “clogged channels” of communication. If there were no elections, they would not have been so



afraid of the runoffs, which they definitely were. The election mechanism is already functioning. We have elections. The question is how well they can actualize and meet the demand for justice.

The practical, applied system of governance, which I call democracy on demand, is better fit for that. For example, what is print on demand? You need a book, you order it, and you get it printed. No storing, no large amounts of paper and no large-scale production. It's simple, cost-effective and convenient.

Unlike traditional pop-up democracy (“grassroots democracy”), democracy on demand comes from above. This is one of the features of governing and reforming from above, a mechanism proposed and provided by the state for resolving conflicts in “society-government” mode.

There are three components to ensure successful communication within the framework of democracy on demand. The first one is that the protest must be clear and unambiguous: it's a cathedral or it is not a cathedral, a landfill site, a concrete doctor and so on. The second component is that the channel of communication should not be downright opposition. Thirdly, demands should not be purely political, even though absolutely political goals can be achieved.

**KUZNETSOV:** I would add that this is a description of populist mechanisms, especially left-wing ones, which grew out of the mortgage crisis of 2008 and the Occupy Wall Street movement when protesters chained themselves to the fences around banks. Essentially it is a forced dialogue, and so is the Brexit. Demands were directed at the state, seeking more attention from the state to the life of ordinary Brits, to the fact that their life was getting worse. But they were formulated clumsily, in a negative way, through the rejection of Europe. It is no different from “Trump Digs Coal”: “We don't care at all here in the Appalachians. We make bourbon, we work hard, and everything is fine. But you come down on our coal.” And then there comes the man who for the first time since John Kennedy notices that coal, too, is a precious commodity. Before that, they did not care and traditionally voted for Democrats (just as the working class of Northern England, which Johnson is trying, not without success, to win over, always voted for the Labor Party). And then all of a sudden it turns out that there is demand. They are tired of hearing that coalmines must be shut down. What the hell! They shut down the mines, they shut us down, too. “The march of

Lilliputians under the ‘The governor does not notice us’ slogan” is a brilliant phrase from the *Election Day* film, which describes the populist wave.

**LUKYANOV:** We have looked into the notion of justice. What about human dignity in its different interpretations? Is it relevant to us?

**KHARKHORDIN:** Maybe. After all, intuitively it is understood as “living with dignity,” and often there is no need to use these exact words to define it. Responses in focus groups may range from “Don’t touch mine” to “I have personal space” and so on. Demand for the protection of human dignity is formulated differently in people’s daily speech. In other words, while dignity has been a powerful driver of politics over the last ten years around the world (we have just published a book on this), it is not a common category in public discourse for the time being.

**VASILYEV:** Except for ethnic republics. They have some kind of equivalent, but close to what we call dignity. The protests in Ingushetia were largely underlain by the Caucasian understanding of what we call dignity. This is why the police didn’t fight the protesters.

**KHARKHORDIN:** I think there are discursive reasons why this term is not played up in the press now, and they are connected with the “Revolution of Dignity” in Kiev. The Ukrainian word for dignity—*gidnost’*—differs from the Russian understanding of dignity, where its aristocratic component seems to derive from the 18th century language and therefore is an archaism. The word “*godnost’*” [fitness-Ed.] is an aristocratic concept. In Belarusian, just like in Polish, initially it probably meant fitness for military service. In other words, you may be an aristocrat and be ready for a military feat as such. But despite all the differences in the meaning of the words “*gidnost’*” and “dignity,” if our journalists started actively using the term ‘dignity’ now, loading it not with a philosophical connotation, but with a journalistic one, this would be too serious a parallel. This is why the notion of ‘dignity’ is not in public discourse yet. And only if people start yelling more and more often “You are insulting my dignity,” referring to detentions on the streets of Moscow, something may change.

And let me say a few words about the illusiveness of elections. In terms of classical republicanism, elections are an anti-democratic mechanism. This had been known since the days of Aristotle and Cicero, up until Rousseau. Then the American and French Revolutions occurred and views changed. But

even in the early modern period, political theory claimed that no election could compare to a great equalizer and democratizer which was lot drawing.

**LUKYANOV:** I have recently read an article by economist Branko Milanović, who explains in detail that equal elections would lead to a catastrophe. His point is that votes should not be taken away but should instead be added to those worthy to give them a voting package. Let a person have a package of votes for a year and use it as he sees fit. If he wants to use all of it in a presidential election, he may do so. It’s like an investment, some sort of gamification. But my understanding is that nothing can be done with the electoral system. Direct and equal elections cannot be abolished because they cannot be abolished. Am I wrong?

**KUZNETSOV:** No, you are not. As has already been said, we may not like cups, but drinking from a cup is more convenient than from cupped hands.

**LUKYANOV:** In your opinion, what role does political television play now? Does it touch a raw nerve or it doesn’t? Ratings show that people watch television. Can’t there be the opposite effect?

**VASILYEV:** There is no political television anywhere nowadays. I mean most of the countries that I can find in my 100-channel television package. I won’t call CNN political television. It’s rather propaganda television. This has absolutely nothing to do with politics. Nor would I apply this definition to Fox. I do not watch German and French channels, and BBC, unfortunately, is not political television either. Our talk shows focus on pressing political issues, but they are not political in the true sense of the word either.

**LEIBIN:** I have a dissenting opinion. I think political television plays a colossal role in shaping public sentiment. Some dignitaries in regions believe that it does not help create a healthy atmosphere and convert social money into social sentiment. People, old people included, feel frightened that there is going to be a nuclear war with the United States and so on. But the main thing that you can see on television and almost nowhere else is value-centered and ideological discussions. We worry about our Ukrainian brothers, we are offended by America, there are our values, and there are their values. “Shit and steam” elections can only be won if there is no alternative, because the issue of ultimate values is more important than the issue of minor communal improvements. Meanwhile, television keeps talking, arduously and hysterically, about “our and their” values. I don’t

understand why they are mobilizing people if there is no nationwide call or federal election campaign. But they are doing it anyway.

Even Zelensky has made an ideological, value-charged statement, albeit quite mildly: “I am not a man of the system, I am with people; I am a servant of the people, not the former regime.”

Democracy does not work as a means of harmonizing the interests of different groups, but it is effective, on the one hand, for presenting collective values, and on the other hand, for solving specific issues through democracy on demand. And yet there is a huge demand for democracy since even the most loyal people would still like to have a free political choice.

Russia has a very frank political system. Almost all of our elections have been meaningful. We elect a president as a king, a sovereign, not some manager for a certain term. This is a very risky thing. But it would not be reasonable to put all crucial issues to the test of democracy, and crucial decisions should definitely not be made too often.

As a journalist, I like that our politics is frank and everything becomes known. In Ukraine politics is even franker and even more becomes known there. But it’s uncomfortable to live like that. It would be good to covert politics into a show, at least partly.

**LUKYANOV:** Each time we hold presidential elections, they provide a pretext for organizing a referendum on some substantive issues such as whether our state should remain the way it is or not. But the referendum experience in other countries drives everyone to despair because every plebiscite is a catastrophic process. However, they did it because of the problems they had, whereas we are doing this of our own free will.

**LEIBIN:** I think Russia would make an institutional leap if Vladimir Vladimirovich said: “Any of these two candidates will suit me.”

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