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The Kuzminov vs. Navalny Debate

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Anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny wrote in his blog last week that he opposed the draft of a new law to regulate state tenders prepared by the Economic Development Ministry and the Higher School of Economics. In response, Higher School of Economics president Yaroslav Kuzminov challenged Navalny to a public debate. That contest, held on March 18 and broadcast live on the Internet, has become a landmark event for several reasons.

First, Navalny could very much emerge as the political leader of a new generation of Russians. They have been waiting for a leader with Navalny's qualities for more than a decade. His previous radio debate with United Russia member and State Duma Deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov in which they discussed whether United Russia is "a party of crooks and thieves" attracted more than 600,000 viewers on YouTube, a mind-boggling figure for a 50-minute discussion of purely political issues.

Second, Kuzminov, the head of one of Russia's top universities, has a direct interest in seeing that government services and the procedures governing state procurements function honestly and effectively. The Higher School of Economics has participated in and won many tenders held by the Economic Development Ministry. Kuzminov is the main driving force behind reforms to secondary and higher education in Russia. The fact that Kuzminov was recently

appointed to help develop the government's economic strategy indicates that he is one of the most influential economists in the country.

In established democracies, public debate can help shape public policy. In Russia, though, with the current political system and ruling elite locked in for years to come, the people do not have any real choices to make, and this debate will have no direct bearing on the immediate future. But public opinion can play a role even in nondemocratic systems. The Navalny-Kuzminov debate was the first meaningful discussion by prominent individuals to be aired in many years. It might very well prove to be as important for the country as the April 1993 televised debate between Alexander Rutskoi, President Boris Yeltsin's vice president who in 1993 became Yeltsin's hard-line opponent, and liberal economist and former acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. The two politicians sparred over corruption allegations against Yeltsin and his inner circle, as well as Gaidar's economic reform programs.

In the Kuzminov-Navalny debate, Kuzminov contended that the current law for regulating state tenders is terrible and that the new law should relax formal and procedural requirements to protect conscientious buyers and sellers from costly and unnecessary steps. Only greater transparency, he said, would enable officials to more effectively eliminate bribes and kickbacks in state procurement deals.

Navalny argued that however bad the current law might be, at least it does not officially legalize corrupt practices the way the new bill would.

Ideally, Russians would now be able to choose between the important positions taken by Kuzminov and Navalny as voters in democratic countries everywhere do — through free elections.

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