

Campaign Begins With Testy Debate

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

February 06, 2012



Gennady Zyuganov, left, trading barbs Monday with Mikhail Prokhorov in the first official presidential debate. **Sergey Ponomarev**

Communist Gennady Zyuganov and businessman Mikhail Prokhorov kicked off the presidential campaign season on Monday with a testy TV debate that centered on Zyuganov's political accomplishments and Prokhorov's connection to the chaotic 1990s.

The candidates repeated familiar promises and accusations, with Zyuganov pledging to bring "justice and socialism" and warning that a vote for his billionaire opponent was a vote for plutocracy. Prokhorov boasted about his business record and said Zyuganov had little to show for his almost 20 years in the State Duma.

The debate was tense from the beginning, as the candidates frequently interrupted and spoke over each other. The ugliest moments came when Zyuganov twice invoked Hitler to criticize Prokhorov, and Prokhorov called Zyuganov the successor to Soviet-era Communist leaders, whom he blamed for the deaths of millions.

"What moral right do you have to rule after what the Communists did?" Prokhorov said, prompting Zyuganov to later accuse him of disrespecting the accomplishments of the Soviet Union.

Though a more experienced debater, Zyuganov appeared to stumble when asked to list concrete proposals for strengthening Russia's economy, and he vacillated on whether the Communists would confiscate private property if returned to power, reiterating a pledge to nationalize natural resource extraction companies.

Even before Channel One broadcast the debate — which was taped earlier — the candidates struck notes of disappointment publicly.

"Of course, debates are a completely new form of 'dialogue' for me: a brouhaha," Prokhorov said on Twitter. "In short, we shouted to our heart's content. Say 'hello' to 'trial by fire.'"

Zyuganov, who repeatedly called Prokhorov a "boor," wrote on Twitter: "Unfortunately, Prokhorov and I were not able to have a normal conversation. He didn't discuss anything; he simply repeated worn-out phrases."

Zyuganov and Prokhorov trail far behind Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in opinion polls ahead of the March 4 presidential vote. Putin is polling at 52 percent, Zyuganov and Liberal Democrat Vladimir Zhirinovskiy at 8 percent, and A Just Russia's Sergei Mironov and Prokhorov at 4 percent, according to the results of a Jan. 28 poll by state-run VTsIOM.

Campaigning was technically forbidden before Saturday, though Prokhorov and Zyuganov held their first one-on-one TV debate on Jan. 19 on a program mediated by veteran journalist Vladimir Solovyov, prompting complaints from Zhirinovskiy and others that were dismissed by the Central Elections Commission.

The five candidates are allotted nine hours of free airtime on federal TV channels and radio stations before campaigning ends at midnight on March 3, and all — excluding Putin — are scheduled to participate in about a dozen televised debates.

Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said the prime minister is too busy to participate in debates but might send a proxy on his behalf.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/02/06/campaign-begins-with-testy-debate-a12416>