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The Many Myths About Navalny

By Victor Davidoff

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The mayoral election will be held in Moscow in less than three weeks, and as election day draws nearer more people are asking, "Who is Mr. Navalny?"

There are at least three answers to that question. Outside a metro station you might run into one Navalny — a tall guy in a polo shirt and penny loafers patiently explaining to babushkas that since about 30 percent of the city budget is stolen by bureaucrats and their cronies, the quality of life in Moscow would improve by a third if corruption were eliminated.

Two other Navalnys live on the Internet. One is someone his supporters call an "ice breaker" capable of breaking up the authoritarian system built by President Vladimir Putin. These are the people backing Navalny's campaign slogan: "Change Russia, starting with Moscow."

But there is another version of Navalny popular on the Internet — that he is a "Kremlin project" created by dark forces who want to freeze the country in the state it is now, or even nudge it toward the abyss.

These aren't just Navalny's political opponents from United Russia. Oddly, among those who

categorically reject Putin's political order, there are a lot of people who are likewise categorically against the candidate Navalny. Their dislike is based on two myths that are widely circulated on the Russian blogosphere.

The first myth is that Navalny isn't an independent figure but merely Acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin's sparring partner for the Sept. 8 election. Sobyanin isn't a completely legitimate mayor since nobody elected him. This former Communist Party bureaucrat was appointed to the mayoral post by then-President Medvedev in October 2010. Sobyanin's political influence will grow if he wins the mayor's seat in a fair election. That's why he needs to beat real competitors from the opposition, especially Navalny.

This myth is busted by one irrefutable fact: No one intends to run a fair election in Moscow, with or without Navalny. Candidates other than Sobyanin do not have access to the main television stations, and even debates are broadcast on two cable stations that are not watched by or accessible to most Muscovites. In any case, Sobyanin has refused to take part in debates.

But Navalny's campaign is under the most pressure. Banners that his supporters hang on their balconies are cut down by "flying street cleaners" who rappel down from the roof. Windows of cars with Navalny stickers are broken. Workers from the city housing authority steal Navalny campaign materials and are paid a ruble for every flyer they take from apartment house entrances — not much, but a welcome supplement to their meagre salaries nonetheless.

Meanwhile, if Sobyanin is having nightmares, Navalny surely figures in them. Even before the campaign began, Navalny published the shocking information that each tree planted by the city authorities along Tverskaya Ulitsa cost the city as much as a studio apartment. He also published the convoluted routes by which money is diverted from the Moscow city budget, a complex scheme that would make al-Qaida envious.

Then Navalny found and published on his anti-corruption blog information that Sobyanin's 16-year-old daughter had an apartment of more than 300 square meters (3,000 square feet). After that, Navalny discovered that Sobyanin's married older daughter, 25, has two apartments: one in a prestigious apartment house in Moscow and another in St. Petersburg. The total value of all these apartments is estimated at $10 million.

Others say they won't vote for Navalny because they believe in another myth — that Navalny is a Russian nationalist. The basis of this myth is Navalny's speeches at the nationalist Russian Marches in 2008 and 2011 and his frequent statements that the country's immigration policy must be tightened.

Speaking of his participation in the Russian Marches in an interview to the magazine New Times, Navalny said, "Normal people need to attend them — people who can explain to school children what the root of the problem is and why their idiotic and revolting slogans will never solve it." In his speeches at the these marches, Navalny asserted that the problem was the policies of the United Russia party and nothing else.

It's not at all clear why Navalny's call to introduce a visa regime with Central Asian states to limit undocumented workers is a sign of nationalism. This is standard practice in most countries. Besides, Navalny was the only mayoral candidate who openly stated that the camps

set up for illegal migrants in Moscow this August were themselves illegal.

That's not to say that all of Navalny's views are acceptable. For example, he recognizes the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But against the background of the Orthodox imperialist nationalism promoted by the Kremlin, Navalny is like the slave-owning U.S. revolutionary Thomas Jefferson — certainly imperfect, but unquestionably better than a mad, authoritarian king. So it's no wonder that Navalny, for all his flaws, is supported by Garry Kasparov, who is Jewish, and Boris Akunin, an ethnic Georgian.

Finally, the funny thing about the criticism of Navalny as a Russian nationalist is the fact that Navalny isn't Russian. In an interview to the Ukrainian television station Inter he said: "I'm half-Ukrainian and half-Russian. A great number of my relatives live in Ukraine. My genes and roots probably make me more Ukrainian."

But in the end, do facts really matter? For centuries in Russia, people believed that venerating icons was the best defense against smallpox. Later it turned out that there was a better method: vaccinations. That gives some hope that facts will win out again.

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