

# PONARS Eurasia

● ● ● NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

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30 Jan 2017

PONARS scholars and experts discuss the unprecedented presence of signs related to Russia at Saturday's Women's March throughout the United States and the world. While perhaps not surprising given the role played by Russia in the recent U.S. election, what effect is sustained public attention on Putin's relationship with Trump, and Russia's role in U.S. politics generally, likely to have on U.S.- Russian relations during the Trump administration? Does this present new challenges? Opportunities?

Regina Smyth (Indiana University) — Given the lack of outcry and relatively tepid concern in opinion polls regarding allegations of Russian influence in U.S. elections, the number of Russia related signs at the Women's March in Washington, DC, was unexpected. While the majority of posters drew heavily on broad themes related to women's health, autonomy, and rights, there were a wide range of signs centered on climate change (mother earth), voting rights, healthcare and equal protections for the LGBTQ community. Russia-related signs were in the minority of the themes represented in protest art but they were still significant. The signs and posters were clever and often beautifully executed with impressive art. They were also constructed by people with some knowledge

of Russia, the US presidential campaign, and the issues at hand. There were a few Pussy Riot balaklava's, many depictions of shirtless President Putin, and signs that used historical themes and Stalinist-style posters with photo-shopped faces of Trump and Putin. There was also a great deal of Soviet-era Cold War imagery.

The signs linking Russia, Putin and Trump invoked existing language and memes that were often bawdy and hilarious. The playfulness of the messages raised the question as to whether the Russia/Putin connection was simply fodder for good puns and comedy or reflected deep concerns of the Trump opposition. I would argue that this art carried a clear message of concern. The signs introduced three broad arguments. The first argument framed the issue in terms of Mr. Trump's close relationship to Mr. Putin.



These placards included art of the two

Presidents together, lists of Presidential tasks that included phoning Mr. Putin or visiting Moscow, and spending time together. A second group reflected concerns about Russian interference in U.S. elections. These placards depicted Mr. Trump as a puppet (invoking HRC's charge in the third presidential debate) or a stooge. Others targeted Mr. Putin with strong images and the words "Not My President," or stated that Mr. Putin had put Mr. Trump in office as in, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Tsar, Putin Put You Where You Are."

Many of these posters were also bawdy, invoking the salacious details of the Steele briefings in puns and metaphors. The final group of posters focused on the perceived autocratic tendencies of both leaders. This last group of signs was much smaller than the other two. Still, as a whole the prevalence of these themes showed that President Trump's ties to Russian are increasingly salient as a point of concern and a mechanism to mobilize opposition.



There were also some signs in Russian and translated in English. At one point late in the day, a group of activists misunderstood the intent of the sign with the words "Demagogue, Fascist, Troll, Predator, Fraudster. The Truth Will Defeat You," written in Russian. They started chanting "USA" and "This is America." The author turned the sign around showing the

translation and the crowd erupted into cheers. There was also a Russian language "Pussy Riot" placard with art depicting the "Pussy Grabs Back" meme and referencing Mr. Trumps

remarks on the released video footage with Billy Bush. In conversations on the street, in the metro and the airport, participants noted the gap between current polls and the messages of the posters related to Russia at the March. They also stressed the need to continue Congressional investigations into linkages between the campaign team and Cabinet members to Russia. These pressures may bolster Congressional resolve. Although not a central goal of the March, it reinforced the growing sense that voters should be pressing their representatives to continue investigations now underway.

The depiction of U.S.-Russian relations on the street could provide a serious obstacle to improved relations with the Trump administration. The crowds across the United States were large and diverse and are likely to spur Congressional concern about alliances with the Trump administration over foreign policy, especially in light of new reports of ongoing efforts by the intelligence services. The focus on Mr. Putin as the problem and the depiction of him on the posters at the march have the danger of reigniting personalism that impedes comprehensive policy toward Russia. Increasing the salience of Russia among the Trump opposition could undermine any hope of a better relationship. Mr. Trump will find it much easier to bait Mr. Putin than to address the other serious concerns of March participants: funding for Planned Parenthood, the protection of reproductive rights, support for LGBTQ rights, and voting rights. This is particularly true if his focus is on domestic policy over any international concerns. On the other hand, the focus on Russia raises the potential for a sustained and serious conversation about what a good relationship with Russia might look like rather than defining a good relationship as a policy goal.