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## MUELLER PROBE AND RUSSIA-US RELATIONS



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One of this year's key intrigues was resolved last week. US Special Counsel **Robert Mueller** presented the results of his investigation into the potential collusion between Donald Trump's team with Russia, and whether President Trump obstructed justice. Even though the full text of the report has not yet been released, Attorney General William Barr's opinion, based on the Mueller report, was presented to public. The findings say that accusations of the Trump team colluding with Russia could not be confirmed. Mueller left it to discretion of the attorney general to decide whether Trump obstructed justice. In his findings, Barr argues that Trump did not obstruct justice, thereby effectively lifting the threat of charges against Trump on both key counts and absolving the president.

Like the president himself, Trump's proponents took the attorney's findings as a victory. Spontaneous processions to celebrate "No Collusion Day" took place in several US cities.

It is difficult not to see what is happening as a farce. Trump's muddled victory in the presidential race, in which, apparently, he was not going to win, is the source of current developments. The amateurish mistakes of his team during the election campaign and a shock in the Democratic camp led to a major political crisis in modern US history. During the Mueller probe, Trump was forced to take a passive stance, commenting on the constant leaks to the press of the dubious details of the investigation.

However, it must be said that Trump won. At least because an opinion has taken shape among the US bureaucracy that impeachment during a time of deep divide in US society would be detrimental to the United States. Despite the Democrats' demand to publish the full text of Mueller investigation, this crisis has run its course.

It appears that all the key elements of this investigation have already been made public in the form of media leaks, so publishing the full text of the report will not bring anything new. Prosecutor Barr's findings say that Mueller is not planning to press more accusations in connection with his probe. During the investigation, charges have already been brought against US citizens, including Paul Manafort, Trump's former election campaign chief, and some Russian citizens. Manafort was convicted and sentenced to seven and a half years behind bars. But the main count of the prosecution, which could be used for political purposes – an accusation of Trump's ties with the Kremlin – was refuted. Apparently, this is why Trump does not object to publication of Mueller investigation materials.

What does this mean for Russia-US relations? In fact, not much progress has been made. Even if charges or allegations are dropped with regard to Donald Trump, they remain with regard to Russia. Any improvements in relations between the two countries will be carefully analyzed. Trump will not be free to act in relations with Russia. In addition, it was an illusion to believe that Trump was a pro-Russia candidate.

The United States is entering a new electoral cycle for the 2020 presidential election. In the course of this campaign, the Russian theme will not fade into the background, and the Russian trail will be suggested should an incomprehensible or an inexplicable electoral move occur. Although in its current form, Trump's opponents have already used up the potential of the Mueller report – constant leaks about the course of the investigation created an unpleasant information background for President Trump – the Democrats will not hesitate to level new charges against Russia.

However, in general, this approach has run out of steam with no new arguments in sight. If it's fair to say that an artillery shell never hits the same spot twice, then new accusations of collusion with Russia against Trump or other potential presidential candidates would not draw as much attention as the initial accusations.

Sensible people should ask themselves: if in two years of investigation no facts were found that could justify filing charges against the president of betraying national interests or prove collusion with a foreign state, wasn't this entire two-year political campaign just another bout of hysteria by Trump's detractors?

I believe that refuting the thesis of Trump collusion with Russia will reduce the urgency and relevance of any Russian connection in US politics. Russia, unwittingly, has become a passive participant in the US processes, an object of conjecture and paranoia. Passive, mind you. Moscow's attempt to convey its perspective to the US establishment failed. Numerous interviews with the Russian President and his comments during news conferences have always been falsely interpreted by the US establishment.

Russia was considered the winner who effectively planted its agent in the White House. Even Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov acknowledged Russia's unsuccessful attempts to make its point of view known to the Western establishment: "It's useless to



try to explain anything to them. They just don't understand.”

Overall, the Mueller investigation, as well as the political campaign around it, was an inconceivable exercise in self-scrutiny by the United States. Now, more than ever, the United States has become self-absorbed. Meanwhile, what is happening in US domestic politics spills over into international politics, occasionally creating insoluble conundrums. For the past two and a half years, Russia-US relations have been virtually paralyzed, and there's no doubt that they will remain unproductive. There is little potential for normalizing or even slightly improving them.

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**Work experience:** Andrey is a director of the Laboratory of International Trends Analysis at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. He also is a Program Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, and editor-in-chief of the "Vneshnyaya Politika" (Foreign Policy) journal. He was a Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, Guido Carli Free University of International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Harvard University and Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey. He is a member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and a member of the Working Group on the Future of Russian-American Relations.

