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The End of the Mueller Investigation and Its Implications for U.S. Domestic and Foreign Policy

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According to the U.S. attorney general, Special Counsel Robert Mueller found no evidence that President Donald Trump or his campaign staff cooperated with Russia during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Therefore, the Democrats' goal will not be impeachment but to create a message about Trump's unworthiness for re-election. This will be facilitated by the investigations initiated by them in congressional committees, and by other probes carried out by the U.S. judicial system. Trump will try to limit their effect by seeking successes in domestic and foreign policy, although no breakthrough in relations with Russia is to be expected.

The subject of the Mueller investigation, which lasted from 17 May 2017 to 22 March 2019, was alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Allegations against Trump's circle, previously investigated by the FBI, also fell within the scope of the inquiry (as did new leads resulting from those probes). The investigation report was submitted to Attorney General William P. Barr, but this does not mean that it will be delivered to Congress, let alone made public. Before taking office, Barr said that the report should be published only after the most sensitive information was edited or summarised. As attorney general, he has no legal obligation to provide the report to Congress or the public.

Before the end of the investigation, the House of Representatives unanimously adopted a non-binding resolution, calling on Department of Justice (DoJ) to publish the final report. So far, members of Congress have been briefed on key Mueller findings in a short letter, and expect to receive an edited version of the report in mid-April. Barr will testify before the House and Senate Judiciary Committees in May, to answer questions related to the investigation.

The Results of the Investigation. Over a period of 22 months, Mueller questioned the most important figures in Trump's circle. There were allegations against six people related to his presidential election campaign. Some were charged with making false statements to the FBI or Congress. These included campaign advisors George Papadopoulos (who served a 14-day prison sentence) and Roger Stone (trial pending), National Security advisor Michael Flynn (sentence pending), campaign chairman Paul Manafort (sentenced to seven and a half years in prison in relation to false claims about pro-Russian lobbying in Ukraine before joining the Trump team), deputy campaign chairman Rick Gates (who faced the same charges as Manafort but avoided jail thanks to his cooperation with Mueller), and Michael Cohen, Trump's personal lawyer, who was accused of violating campaign funding rules, tax evasion and giving false testimony (sentenced to three years in prison).

The Mueller investigation confirmed the earlier findings of Russian interference in the election. This interference consisted mainly of a disinformation campaign and the theft and publication of Democratic National Committee (DNC) correspondence. Mueller, however, found no evidence of cooperation between Trump's campaign staff and Russia, or that the president may have suspected such cooperation.

The other issue threatening Trump's presidency was the accusation of obstruction of justice related to pressure exerted on the FBI director James Comey and his removal from office. The result of the investigation was ambiguous, which was explained by Mueller himself. He said: "while this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him". Barr, asked to decide whether to press charges, said the evidence collected was insufficient.

The Prospect of Further Actions. Mueller did not recommend any new charges against any of the accused, or against other people. However, state prosecutors are continuing their investigations. Among the allegations against Trump are those being examined in New York, concerning financial fraud relating to his business operations and campaign financing irregularities. While these are the most serious accusations against the president, any charges resulting from the investigation may only be brought when he has left office. This is due to the DoJ practice of not prosecuting the sitting president.

Democrats emphasise that, although Mueller did not prove Trump's guilt, he did not establish his innocence either. They will therefore seek access to the full text of the report, and will attempt to use every violation discovered by Mueller to hinder Trump's re-election. There is little likelihood that Barr will publish an unedited version of the report. The DoJ is obliged to remove any information deemed classified or related to ongoing investigations. Full transparency will also be demanded by the Democratic candidates seeking party nomination for the 2020 presidential election. Democrats will engage House committees to conduct their own investigations, in relation to matters already in the hands of state prosecutors, and to Trump's overseas investments and his relatives and associates' connections with foreign investors and governments.

Republicans will try to hinder these efforts by proving that the investigation was politically motivated. Their argument is reinforced by the fact that Mueller found no evidence of Trump's cooperation with Russia. In addition, they will try to determine whether the FBI led by Comey duly investigated the leak of DNC emails and Russian interference in the election, and whether the leadership of the DoJ and the FBI could have colluded with the goal of removing the president from office. In this way, Republicans aim to present Trump to the electorate in 2020 as a victim of Democrats determined to hinder presidency.

Conclusions. Impeachment has become unlikely due to the outcome of the Mueller investigation, particularly as the Democratic Party leadership has already declined to initiate proceedings without the bipartisan support and strong evidence of guilt required to carry a vote in the Senate. U.S. public opinion is also against impeachment, with 59% opposing such a move, 42% expressing approval of the president's job, and six out of 10 saying they trust the findings of Mueller's inquiry.

The Democratic Party will continue attacks on Trump. The completion of Mueller's investigation strengthens the president's position and increases the flexibility of his policy choices. Therefore, he will try to engage personally in new initiatives on the domestic and foreign fronts, hoping to gain rapid and visible success from these. He will try to prove that the Democrats are defaming him and his actions despite the lack of evidence to support such claims.

In domestic policy, Trump can take new initiatives in migration, regardless of the dispute over the construction of a wall on the Mexican border. Due to the humanitarian crisis, the southern border is likely to be closed. The Trump Administration is also preparing for a court battle to eliminate the healthcare system based on the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) after the federal court in Texas ruled it unconstitutional.

The conclusion of trade negotiations with China is a potential area for success in foreign policy. It is likely that the U.S. will reach an agreement more favourable than the current WTO rules. Trump can also get personally involved in solving the ongoing crisis in Venezuela.

It is unlikely that Trump will attempt to make any breakthrough in U.S. relations with Russia. Although the result of Mueller's investigation dispels many (if not all) doubts about Trump's political and business connections with Moscow, he has no room to manoeuvre in bilateral relations. This is due to Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and concerns about a repetition in 2020, support for the Assad regime in Syria and the Maduro dictatorship in Venezuela (the latter a de facto move against the U.S.), violations of the [Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces](#) (INF), and the development of new types of strategic weapons, undermining U.S. and NATO security.

That is why Trump can only seek stability, rather than progress, in relations with Russia, in particular by seeking to extend the [New START Treaty](#) in 2021. Initiatives aimed at increasing the scale and consolidation of U.S. military engagement on NATO's Eastern Flank also seem to be unthreatened, although the Trump Administration will continue to raise the need for European NATO Allies to increase defence spending.