



– SPECIAL REPORT –

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**LEGITIMACY FOR POST-CRIMEA
POLITICAL ORDER
RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

- The 2018 Russian presidential elections were in fact a referendum on the political course launched by Vladimir Putin in 2014. It should not come as a surprise that the event had been scheduled for 18 March, which symbolically marked the fourth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea.
- The Russians have overwhelmingly supported the so-called the post-Crimea political order. For the first time in Russian history, one candidate was supported by more than half of all citizens entitled to vote in the elections. Even if both turnout and Putin's result had been corrected in compliance with numbers provided by some experts who had proved numerous instances of electoral frauds, the incumbent president would have received three-fourths of the votes with a turnout of 60 percent.
- Putin's success was also possible thanks to the lack of genuine competition (the only rival, who would actually fight with the incumbent president, would be Alexei Navalny; however, he had been eliminated before the start), absolute dominance of the media, conflict with the West after the attempted murder on Sergei Skripal and Putin's „war” speech and, last but not least, thanks to a new method to mobilise the electorate and electoral fraud. Moreover, it was possible to apply large-scale abuses, which have been brought about by recent changes in Russia's electoral law.

- Russian citizens did not vote over Putin's future; instead, they were supposed to approve the president's past activities. It was about accepting the events that had taken place over the last four years and not setting out any plans for the future. In fact, any vote for Putin would be in favour of the status quo in Russia's external policy (such a state of matters would deepen the conflict with the West as well as the policy of military aggression); in addition, such choice would trigger further stagnation in the country's internal affairs (no reforms introduced, „as long as the situation does not deteriorate”).
- After announcing his victory, Putin assured that he would not take into account any constitutional reforms. Such a claim basically means that he would no longer be able to hold the position of Russian president in six years (as the constitution allows a person to serve two consecutive terms). Nonetheless, the decision may be changed at any time. In addition, the president might also introduce a solution that would grant him full authority on a different position. However, it is doubtful that Putin would make any decisions on his future after 2024 during the first period of the new term.

Vladimir Putin secured enough votes for an outright victory during the first round, with a turnout of 67.54 percent. The acting president, who ran in the elections as an independent candidate, received 56.43 million votes (76.69 percent). Communist Party candidate Pavel Grudinin was in second with 11.77 percent (8.66 million voters). He was followed by nationalist and leader of the LDPR party Vladimir Zhirinovskiy with 5.65 percent (4.15 million people). In this way, the candidates of the two largest political groups in the State Duma obtained 12.81 million votes in total, which constituted about 17 percent of the vote. If one includes Putin's result, who was in fact a candidate of the United Russia party, it turns out that the nominees of the State Duma parties (both the ruling one as well as the opposition political groups) received 94 percent of all votes.

Civic Initiative party candidate Ksenia Sobchak, who presented herself as the only real alternative to other candidates, was supported by only 1.24 million people. 1.68 percent of votes constitutes the worst

election result that has ever been achieved by a candidate claiming to be the leader of the liberate electorate. Grigory Yavlinsky, leader of the socio-liberal Yabloko party, appealed to similar categories of voters. Eventually, he achieved 770,000 votes (1.05 percent). Russian business ombudsman Boris Titov, who represented the business-oriented Party of Growth, received 557,000 votes (0.76 percent). They were followed by chairman of the Central Committee of the Communists of Russia party Maxim Suraikin (499,000 votes, 0.68 percent of all votes) and head of the Russian People's Union party Sergey Baburin (480,000 votes, 0.65 percent of the vote).

It seems that the scale of Putin's victory and the absolute domination of the State Duma parties were not the only surprises during the recent elections. Current political situation in Russia seems to be reflected by distinct attitudes towards the state's external policy after 2014 as well as various points of view on democracy and liberal values. Candidates, who referred to the second option, received altogether no more than 2 million votes (2.29 percent). Such a devastating defeat has not

been registered by the Russian democratic camp since 1991. Judging by the election result, imperial, populist, nationalist and communist camp (in Russia, such political options are not mutually exclusive) has gained over 95% of votes. More than 70 million Russians supported the political course and state ideology adopted at the time of the annexation of Crimea. They may have done it out of convictions, old habits or they might have been forced to do so.

PUTIN AND THE OTHERS

In the majority of oblasts, Putin's result looks the same and varies between 70 and 75 percent of all votes: such was the case in as many as 53 Russian regions. Interestingly, such a situation occurred independently of the political background of a given oblast. So Putin got 73 percent of the vote in Irkutsk Oblast, traditionally ruled by the communists and he was supported by 71 percent of inhabitants of Novosibirsk Oblast. Surprisingly, he was backed by 71 percent of Muscovites, who tended to support opposition parties during the autumn local elections. One could notice a considerable increase in

support from his previous opponents or voters who had been in favour of other candidates. In fact, apart from any instances of electoral fraud, Putin's result could have been improved thanks to the electoral mobilisation of citizens who had not been willing to vote before.

In traditional bastions of Putin support, he achieved a slightly better result (80 percent in Stavropol Krai and 78 percent in Voronezh Oblast). Here, loyalty towards the acting president was noted at a level similar to the one in 2012. Six years ago, Putin recorded the worst results in Moscow (46 percent) and the following regions: Karelia, Vladimir, Kaliningrad, Yaroslavl, Kostroma and Irkutsk (between 50 and 55 percent). Thus these regions had been taken under special „protection” long before the voting. For example, Putin appointed new governors of Kaliningrad and Yaroslavl, both of them being former bodyguards of the president. Thanks to such a maneuver, the incumbent president achieved the following results in such cities and regions as Moscow (71 percent), Republic of Karelia (73 percent), Vladimir Oblast (73 percent), Kaliningrad Oblast (76 percent), Yaroslavl Oblast (72 percent), Kostroma Oblast (69 percent) and Irkutsk Oblast (73 percent). On March 18, Putin was supported by the least number of voters in such regions as Yakutia (64.4 percent of votes), Khabarovsk Krai (65.8 percent), Primorski Krai (65.3 percent) and Amur Oblast (67 percent). In the same oblasts, Pavel Grudinin, who came second, managed to achieve the following results: 27.7 percent, 27.2 percent, 18.4 percent, 21.4 percent and 18.6 percent. There was no longer any other region where Putin's result would be lower than 60 percent (in 2012, such a situation occurred only in Moscow and St. Petersburg).

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such oblasts, considered as „problematic” ones: six years ago, Putin got only 46 percent of votes in Moscow, 55 percent in Irkutsk Oblast and 56 percent in Novosibirsk Oblast. Such a change would indicate that, over the last six years, the president has got some

Only in six regions Putin achieved worse result than in 2012; such a state of matters resulted from the rationalisation of the result as evidenced by the example of Chechnya (99.8 percent of votes in 2012 compared to 91.4 percent in 2018). The president's results



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

in such regions and republics as Dagestan, Kalmykia, Mordovia, Karachay-Cherkessia and Yakutia appeared to be so ridiculously high that they have been lowered this year. In such regions as Kabardino-Balkaria (93.4

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percent of the vote, compared to 77.4 percent in 2012), Tuva (91.8 percent, as compared to 90 percent six years ago) and Crimea (92.2 percent), Putin managed to achieve a kind of

a Soviet-like result. As for the peninsula, his intentions were obvious. The elections were held on the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea; moreover, they constituted a kind of referendum in which the Russians were expected to declare themselves for or against the new face of their country after 2014. A few days before the presidential elections, Putin visited Crimea, which seems to explain such an impressive result.

Pavel Grudinin, who achieved the second result (11.77 percent), had a good start, thanks to which he even managed to surpass Zhirinovskiy. At the time, however, he was considered dangerous by the Kremlin, because, in addition to the traditional electorate, the CPRF could attract Putin's voters. In fact, he did not do anything special but the Kremlin launched a black PR campaign against the communist candidate. The Central Election Commission revealed its foreign accounts whereas the Life News channel, considered as the FSB mouthpiece, reported that the candidate had a mistress and the shareholders of the Lenin Sovkhoz (Grudinin is the CEO of the farm)

unexpectedly decided to sue him to the court in the old case of allegedly illegally privatised plots of land. As a result, he received less than 12 percent of all votes. Such a state of affairs seemed to be satisfying also for the party leader Gennady Zyuganov; in 2012, he received 17 percent of the vote.

As for Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, he messed up at the end of his campaign as he clashed with another presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak at the first Russian presidential TV debate. This is the worst result in the history of its starts, comparable with the one he obtained in 1996 (5.7 percent). Zhirinovskiy got the best results in Siberia, the Far East and Transbaikalia. However, he seems to be tired with serious politics, given that he will be 72 years old this year. In addition, he stops attracting followers with his political buffoonery. It will be difficult for him to find his successors. The project does not work anymore. This also means the end of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia that is too strongly related to its leader. Nonetheless, the Kremlin will probably come up with another project, whose main aim would be to administrate both nationalist and populist electorates.

Ksenia Sobchak, referred to as „Zhirinovskiy for the liberals, achieved 1.68 percent of votes and failed to convince the followers of Alexei Navalny not to boycott the elections and to vote for her. As expected, Sobchak obtained most of her votes in Moscow, St Petersburg as well as abroad but she did not manage to achieve more than 5 percent anywhere. Just before the elections, she launched the Party of Change with fellow opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov. The latter has already declared that he intended to run for Moscow Mayor in September 2018 while Sobchak is currently considering her candidacy for the governor of St. Petersburg, provided that Georgy Poltavchenko leaves before the end of his term in autumn 2019. Also Yavlinsky gained most in two biggest Russian cities; however, his election result did not exceed 3.2 percent of votes. Also his result in the

Republic of Ingushetia (2.37 percent) comes as a surprise since he did not manage to exceed 1 percent of votes in other Caucasian republics. Yavlinsky's career seems to come to its end and so does his political party; as in the case of Zhirinovskiy, the Kremlin will seek to replace him with something new. Unless the party founded by Sobchak and Gudkov took over Yavlinsky's voters.

SPECIAL MISSION

Preparations for the presidential elections started in autumn 2016, right after successful parliamentary voting, when United Russia had significantly increased its domination in the State Duma. The plan to prepare and implement a proper election strategy was assigned to Sergey Kiriyenko who was appointed new deputy chief of the president's administration in October 2016.

The main aim was not to increase the president's support compared to the previous

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elections; instead, Putin's campaign team sought to provide him with power legitimacy. Since 2014, Putin has been no longer perceived in terms of a political leader; nowadays, he is considered to be the leader of the nation. It was about the sacralization of post-Crimea Russia; the goal of the elections was to confirm Putin's post-Crimea policy with millions of Russian votes. Therefore, absolute numbers of votes were much more important than any percentages. That is why participation turnout is less important than the number of people voting for Putin. In fact, any Russian who supported Putin was



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

in favour of the annexation of Crimea, the war with Ukraine and the armed conflict in Syria as well as the confrontation with the West. During the campaign, Putin did not compete with Sobchak or Grudinin; instead, he fought with Russia's hostile environment. His real rival was not Zhirinovskiy but Trump, which was eventually confirmed by Putin's annual speech addressed to the members of the Russian Federal Assembly on April 1. The president boasted about new types of weapons, presented himself as the commander in chief of the Russian army as well as he threatened the world with nuclear war.

Due to the lack of serious competitors, Putin was able to secure landslide victory already in the first round. But at the same time, such a situation influenced decline in voter participation. Because, according to both Putin's followers and opponents, if the result is known in advance, there is no point in casting a ballot. Therefore, special steps had to be taken in order to mobilize the electorate. On the one hand, there were some political measures, including Putin's war speech or the conflict with the West after the attempted

murder on Sergei Skripal whereas on the other, the administrative machine had taken some steps to encourage or even force people to go to the polls. Before the elections, the Central Election Commission had conducted an unprecedented information campaign, spending a record amount of money: all Russian media informed about the elections, relevant information was displayed on special screens in the supermarkets, citizens received text messages as well as were invited to meetings organised by public institutions and state companies.

Kiriyenko succeeded in mobilizing the so-called Putin's majority even if the incumbent president had run for office without any electoral program and he had not asked his followers to vote for him. Putin was supported by 56 million people out of 108 million eligible voters; compared to 2012, the number of votes for the current head of state constituted less than 50 percent (45 million voters). So even if one takes into account those citizens who did not go the polls (admitting that most of them had been against the incumbent president, he would have got the majority of over 50

percent in the first round). But it was about implementing a much more ambitious plan. Kiriyenko accepted the challenge and decided to introduce some solutions he had previously applied to a limited extent.

FULL MOBILIZATION

The scheme of the elections turned out to be similar to the one that had already been applied in the so-called „closed cities” with some facilities administered by Rosatom. Such a choice does not seem to be coincidental, though; Sergey Kiriyenko, the current deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration responsible for national policy and elections, used to hold the office of Russia’s state-run nuclear energy company Rosatom. So how did he manage to introduce the „corporate” scheme in the entire country? Presidents, owners and directors of state and private enterprises were supposed to ensure that their employees had voted. Low-level managers ensured that their subordinates had actually casted ballots. Thousands of buses and so-called carousels, which had previously been used in numerous regions, were replaced by the mechanical and centralised system of corporate mobilisation and a „levy en masse” was substituted by a „professional army”. For the first time in Russian history, a state machinery incorporated managers of various enterprises. Voting in the elections constituted not only a manifestation of democratic obligation but it was perceived in terms of a purely administrative and mechanical undertaking. The Kremlin was not interested in the nation’s political will; instead, Russian authorities wanted to test efficiency of the electoral machinery. Employees were mobilized in order to increase voter participation. But there were also some other methods, including letters sent by the Central Election Commission reminding about the voting, competitions, sales and local referenda on various matters, also addressed to those who were normally not interested in serious politics.

However, Putin’s result was more important

than the turnout. Therefore, numerous, large-scale instances of electoral fraud were reported throughout the country. Observers, members of electoral commissions and journalists were prevented from carrying out their activities while some citizens were pressured to vote. There were also some cases of mass transport to polling stations, instances of multiple voting (a practice known in Russia as a “carousel”) and ballot-stuffing. Nobody seemed to care about live streaming webcams set up in

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order to monitor presidential election voting. For example, at the polling station 265 in Simferopol, Reuters journalists counted 797 voters throughout the day. Nevertheless, the official figures stated 1,325 people voted on the day and in person.

It needs to be mentioned that almost 6 million people had declared their willingness to vote outside their permanent place of residence. In 2012, such cases were three times less frequent. It has turned out that there was no problem for someone to come to a polling station in Moscow, claim to be permanently registered in Dagestan and to vote in his or her current place of residence. The election commission were not especially eager to check such cases. So such a person could be added to the list in more than one polling station. In addition, his or her name remained on the list at the local polling station; it was quite simple for someone else to use his or her personal information by faking the signature and throwing the ballot paper into the box. In many cases, a voter who came to



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

the polling station could not find his or her name on the list. Such a situation happened to Lyudmila Narusova, a former deputy of the State Duma and the mother of Ksenia Sobchak. On the other hand, people who declared their willingness to vote outside their place of permanent residence were en masse. According to some polling stations in Moscow, almost half of voters claimed that they had originated from other regions of the country. Interestingly, it appears that 1.5 million voters came to Russia during only several hours of voting. In the morning, Russia's Central Election Commission reported that there were 107.2 million eligible voters. But when the polling stations were closed, the number of eligible voters amounted to 108.7 million. Eventually, the Russian Central Election Commission came up with a simple but quite strange explanations: these were citizens who had signed out of their polling stations as they had had no intention to vote but they changed their mind at the last minute, arrived to the nearest station and added their names to the list.

THE MISSION HAS BEEN COMPLETED BUT...

Putin's real campaign team, headed by Sergey Kiriyenko, can be satisfied with their work. Basically, almost all goals have been achieved. Putin received a record-breaking number of votes and saw an increase in voter turnout from their 2012 levels. Moreover, the elections showed all weak points of the opposition parties whereas the president gained a very strong mandate for further confrontation with the West. According to some media leaks, the Kremlin had aimed to achieve the 70/70 formula. However, the assumption was not completely fulfilled during the recent elections: it is true that Putin got much above the assumed level (76.6 percent) while the turnout was 67,4 percent. Nonetheless, such a result seems to be absolutely satisfying. On one hand, Navalny's boycott did not appear to be successful, and on the other hand, it would have been possible to avoid criticism if Putin had received, for example, some 85-90 percent of the vote with 90 percent voter turnout. The high result was also important due to the fact that so far it was Dmitry Medvedev who could boast about the best election

result (in 2008, he received 71.2 percent of the vote with 69.7 percent turnout). Due to the use of the so-called adminresurs (referred to as management funds that can be spent discretionarily on influencing elections), it was possible to encourage from five up to seven million people (who mostly voted for Putin) to take part in the elections. Also communists were deprived of some of its electorate (in 2012, Zyuganov received 17 percent of votes,

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and in 2018, Grudinin was supported by 12 percent of people). Surprisingly enough, the idea of a boycott, which had been proclaimed by Navalny, appeared to be helpful for Putin. Even if it slightly decreased the turnout, it also increased the percentages of votes for Putin mostly because his opponents did not cast a ballot.

Moreover, the aim was to show hostile Western countries that the Russians were massively in favour of their leader and his policy so they needed to respect him and conduct serious talks. In the light of such a narrative, refusing to negotiate with the Kremlin, boycotting its activities and undertaking any other hostile steps would constitute an action against all Russian citizens. Before the annexation of Crimea, Putin had enjoyed some popularity; nevertheless, it was difficult to call him the leader of the nation. According to the October 2015 survey, only 15 percent of the Russians declared their pride of the president whereas

barely 25 percent of citizens claimed to trust him. Compared with July 2014, 37 percent of the Russians considered themselves to be proud of their president while 46 percent expressed trust in Putin's actions. However, the Crimean effect is not as powerful as it used to be, as evidenced by the assessment of work both of the prime minister and the government. The negative comments seem to prevail over the positive ones. Paradoxically, such a state of affairs strengthens the president's position (who enjoys wide popular support) and favours the process of personifying Russia's political system. On March 18, the Russians voted for Putin as they had not wanted to deteriorate their current situation. It is not about any active support; instead, the Russians are governed by apathy and inaction. The Russians expected nothing but bread and circuses; on one hand, they wanted to be granted social benefits and, on the other, they felt satisfied with the country's war power. During his new term of office, Putin will not change anything or he will introduce just a few reforms.

However, Putin's electoral success is weakened by the situation of his fellow candidates. Six years ago, Mikhail Prokhorov actually ran an extensive campaign, which could not be compared to Sobchak's poor performance. Her political project appeared to be a heavy defeat. It is likely that the Kremlin aimed to make her candidacy a start of the controlled part of the systemic opposition with the view to taking over as much of the liberal electorate as possible. And even though a few days before the election, Ksenia Sobchak and Dmitry Gudkov announced the creation of a new political party, such an idea introduced by the Kremlin political technologists proved to be a failure. Sobchak received only 1.67 percent of the vote. Such a result does not seem to be promising for a new political party. In 2012, the communists were very critical towards Putin as evidenced by their numerous manifestations on the streets of the country. When Grudinin's approval ratings went down, although he was expected to give

the feeling of a fresh start to the Communist party and to go beyond his usual electorate, he took up rhetoric advocated by his predecessor Gennady Zyuganov. Such a lack of competition, which could make the campaign more interesting and encourage people to

participate in the voting, may be explained by the fact that, despite huge efforts made by the Kremlin, governors, mayors and local electoral commissions, the turnout increased by 3 percent and was not as high as in 2008.

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The Warsaw Institute Foundation
Wilcza 9, 00-538 Warsaw, Poland
+48 22 417 63 15
office@warsawinstitute.org