

# **W<sup>I</sup>WARSAW INSTITUTE**

**— SPECIAL RAPORT —**

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## **RUSSIAN ELECTIONS - OPERATION “THE PRESIDENT”**

In the presidential election in Russia on March 18, 2018, won Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin (Russian: Владимир Владимирович Путин), which was announced by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. The most intriguing word in this announcement is „election”. Did presidential election really take place in Russia?



**VLADIMIR PUTIN IN THE POLLING STATION.  
SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU**

The political phenomenon observed on that day in Russia was more like a plebiscite or a referendum. If you look for analogies with similar cases from political life, then you can easily risk the hypothesis that the political spectacle with its backstage from March 18 this year, was almost identical to the referendum on the accession of Crimea to Russia. It was not a coincidence that the election was scheduled for March 18, the fourth anniversary of this event. The final of Putin's election campaign was his nationally

broadcast visit to the bridge over the Kerch Strait, which will connect Russia with Crimea, bypassing Ukraine.

The exceptional mobilization of voters on March 18, in which all the organizations dealing with propaganda, special services, army, state and industrial administration, the Orthodox Church were involved, brought the desired effect. All these institutions have concentrated their efforts so that their employees fulfill their civic duty and vote for

the future of Russia. The word „Russia” was on the lips of both television commentators, playing the role of contemporary agitators, as well as managers of factories, offices, workplaces, pops, military commanders.

It was similar in the Crimea, when four years ago, in the shadows of the „little green men”, as it later turned out, soldiers from the Pskov Division<sup>1</sup>, the votes for „Great Russia” were collected and falsified. And later, that evening, when the results were known, Putin appeared on the TV screens, the winner of the operation „Crimea is ours”, even shed a tear of happiness - Crimea returned to the Homeland. These two referendums are similar to each other.

In this year’s March referendum, however, the Kremlin enriched, in comparison to earlier operations, the „electorate management” strategy, whose main goal was to demonstrate the lack of alternatives to Putin’s leadership, defender and reformer of Russia, strengthening his national leadership and world leader’s myth. Implementation of

- 76.69%. Putin received 56 million 430 thousand votes. Thus, for the organizers of „The President” operation, Putin’s legitimacy, as well as the „Kremlin party”, to exercise power has no right to raise any doubts - it is particularly strong. And the world should face that fact too. (Let us remind that Putin received 52.9 percent in the election in 2000, 71.3 percent in 2004 and 63.6 percent in 2012).

It would be petty to remind in this context that in many state institutions there were, just in case, different ways of controlling electoral behavior. For example, on the day of voting, you had to come to the company and show your supervisor the photo of the completed election card from your mobile phone. In the opinion of the Central Election Commission (rus: Центральная Избирательная Комиссия Российской Федерации - ЦИК РФ - The Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation) violations of electoral procedures were scarce. This was claimed by the Central Election Commission, which canceled the election results in five local committees. Observers of the elections recorded cases of forgery and violations of the voting procedure, but found no grounds to challenge the election. It was said that it was better than in 2012, during the elections to the State Duma.

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## **A much better result was achieved - 76.69 percent. Putin received 56 million 430 thousand votes.**

this goal required very high voter turnout and the best result of the election: it was assumed that the turnout should not be lower than 70 percent. A much better result was achieved

The faith in Russia’s future and Putin turned out to be decisive. An analyst from the Moscow Center Carnegie Andrei Kolesnikov (rus. Андрей Колесников) tried to explain the phenomenon of Putin’s high electoral support: „...you have to refer to the classic concept of crowd psychology. It is better to be in the mainstream, do everything in the same way as a neighbor, rather than stand out from the crowd with the risk of being excluded. / ... / Putin is a symbol of the country, a synonym of Russia, its brand, and in this

symbolic dimension receives support. / ... / I am Russian, which means I belong to Russia, so I am for Putin. Voting in the elections in this context was a vote for the national leader. In this sense, these elections turned out to be more acclamations, expressions of approval.”<sup>2</sup>

## IMITATION OF DEMOCRACY

„Electorate management” has already begun at the stage of preparing the list of candidates for the president’s office. As first, Kremlin precluded Putin’s only, real competitor from running in the election. The one above-mentioned is Alexei Navalny (rus. Алексей Навальный), who has been fighting for leadership in Russian opposition for years. With his real chance of support of about 10-15 pro cent, he had a good capital to continue his political activity and to build a real alternative for the patrimonial system. Officially, Navalny was not registered by the Central Election Commission because he had been legally convicted by the court for an economic offense. The interested party and his supporters were convinced that the trial had been fabricated to limit his elective rights. Navalny has the reputation of a politician who is not controlled by the Kremlin. What is more he even violated the fundamental principle of the Kremlin’s power party - he was looking for corruption among party’s top politicians (i.a. he posted a film about properties and wealth of Dmitry Medvedev (rus. Дмитрий Медведев), the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation.

Authorities chose related to them and to liberals Ksenia Sobchak (rus. Ксения Собчак) – a celebrity, journalist and a daughter of Anatoly Sobchak (rus. Анатолий Собчак), former mayor of Petersburg who helped Putin to launch his career. Sobchak involvement in the operation caused another conflict in liberal-opposition milieu. Conditions,

including financial ones, on which Sobchak agreed to take part in the operations are not known to the public. She admitted in one of the interviews that before the decision on the candidacy was announced she had met with Putin to inform him about her presidential plans however he was not pleased with her decision<sup>3</sup>.

The other participants of „The President” operation were recruited from various fractions forming the broad Kremlin’s power camp: the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (rus. Владимир Жириновский); a Stalin-glorifying communist Pavel Grudinin (rus. Павел Грудинин), the director of Lenin

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## None of Putin’s rivals had the slightest chance of taking a political combat with him.

Sovkhoz producing the best strawberries in Russia unexpectedly replaced in this election Gennady Zyuganov (rus. Геннадий Зюганов) - the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation Коммунистическая партия Российской Федерации - CPRF); a representative of the party Communists of Russia (rus. Коммунисты России) Maxim Suraykin (rus. Максим Сурайкин), claiming that his party has nothing to do with CPRF and that its representatives are the most ideological communists of Russia, and CPRF claims that Suraykin’s party is its spoiler; Boris Titov, a Kremlin’s official „competing” with Putin who is at the same time Presidential





**VLADIMIR PUTIN WITH HIS OPPONENTS.**  
**SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU**

Commissioner for Entrepreneurs' Rights and the leader of the Party of Growth (rus. Партия роста), and the owner of champagne factory; Grigory Yavlinsky (rus. Григорий Явлинский), a liberal and founder of „Yablonko” party (rus. Яблоко), second apart from Zhirinovskiy, political veteran, who for the first time ran for the presidential election in 1996 and received 7.34 percent of votes; Sergey Baburin (rus. Сергей Бабурин) a conservative nationalist, the founder of Russian All-People' Union (rus. Российский общенародный союз) and the organizer of nationalist „Russian Marches” in Moscow<sup>4</sup>.

None of Putin's rivals had the slightest chance of taking a political combat with him. Since the beginning of the campaign they provided a colorful background for the incumbent president. They presented different shades of nationalism and communism, sometimes

minor traces of liberalism. In fact, they posed a symbolic reference to the ongoing conflicts about fundamental issues for Russia, rather second and third plan of the operation. Their participation in it is a pure imitation of democracy and a real life in Russia – a landscape directed to a domestic recipient but also to the creative usage by „Russia Today”, a channel which specializes in political propaganda customized for Kremlin.

### **GOOD NEWS MACHINE**

The list of Putin's opponents appeared in public when the media had already been running the „good news” program for five months, managed by the Kremlin. The economic situation in the country before the election was bad, as the organizers of the program noted. The social welfare of the Russians, who will have to choose the president has a significant impact on the

electoral result. To prevent the election happening in the atmosphere of depression, Putin's employees developed a plan under the slogan „life is improving”. The authorities of the regional authorities were obliged to send „good news” about improving life, new investments, implementation of residents' demands. In the Kremlin, they were analyzed, if necessary - reworked, and sent to the editorial offices of state and commercial media. The next stage of the work of the „good news machine” was the control of their use and reporting to the center about the results<sup>5</sup>.

To the machine of good news Kremlin added a „separate tape” on Putin's political achievements. It was pointed out that he had not run the election campaign himself - he does not have time for it, while performing the duties of the president meticulously and diligently. Therefore, he appeared in all news

them in mind, especially social promises. The strongest emphasis in propaganda was put on Putin's role in Russia's foreign policy, on restoring Russia's status of a great power and defending Russia against an increasingly aggressive NATO. A constant motive for this narrative was the annexation of Crimea, the fair nature of Russia's military mission in Syria, and a steady hand reaching the Ukrainian fraternal nation which is torn apart by civil war. Since autumn 2017, both Russian authorities of various levels and special services exploited the threat of state sovereignty for the purposes of the campaign in the form of allegedly planned Western interference in the election process, and cyberattacks on Russian institutions were announced.

The end of propaganda campaign took place in the shadows of colonel Skripal's case (rus. Скрипаль), a former secret service agent who had been poisoned in the UK by order of Russia, as Theresa May suspected. Russian television tore the Prime Minister apart, but they did not forget about two theses: revenge will always reach traitors, a scandal with an attack on the former colonel suited London or Ukraine. Since this consult, it is extremely easy to move on to the popular narration about the hostile West, besieged Russia and memories of the great Soviet Union, that was respected by everybody. That was the main theme of Putin's propaganda in the last days and hours before the voting.

The „good news machine” did not concern, unfortunately, the president's competitors. On the contrary, for them it turned into a „machine of bad news”. It was the public media that „managed” the image of the other candidates, not they themselves (or their staff). Media policy towards them was also directed by Kremlin. The observer from

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programs. Documentary films devoted to his fight against poverty, injustice, corruption, economic and moral decline of Russia in the 1990s were showed. Even the date of the presidential address was postponed until the beginning of March, so that voters could keep

outside was struck by the main issue: the lack of presidential debates with all candidates, Putin did not have time for them. The debates with the participation of other candidates were directed in the tawdry style and often its main purpose was to discredit the politicians in front of public opinion. In the most scandalous TV episode, Zhirinovskiy called Sobchak a whore, while the latter spilt water on him in the rematch. Television broadcast materials intended to disgrace the other candidates.

The CPRF's candidate, Grudinin, was also the target of these attacks. He was accused of having a bank account overseas (according to the regulations, a presidential candidate is obliged to close the account no later than at the moment of registering one's candidacy). Although on this basis the candidate was not removed from the elections, however - which was a legal curiosity - appropriate information appeared on the posters in the polling stations. An attempt to discredit Grudinin may prove that it was assumed that Grudinin is able to steal few percents of such valuable votes from Putin. Shortly after the start of the campaign he quickly gained social support. It cannot be ruled out that the aim of this media intervention was also weakening the support for the CPRF, which in the deteriorating financial situation of the population could - thanks to extensive party structures across the country and still vivid nostalgia for Union - effectively mobilize the mood of dissatisfaction. The electoral process was under a constant and meticulous control of the Kremlin.

Electoral management is a constantly developing area of extremely practical knowledge, especially in authoritarian systems. Kolesnikov described the atmosphere on the election day: „Millions under the

threat of problems at work, literally dashed to polling stations on the election day. Their responsibility was to vote until 12 – that is the reason for the early morning turnout explosion. They had to submit photographs from the site where they vote. Workers of the public sector, banks, state enterprises, military personnel, special forces, judges, prosecutors, doctors and teachers, academic lecturers, hospital patients, even from the maternity units – all of them were involved in legitimization process of the elections of the old president and the new one. It stands to reason that it is better to vote than to have troubles. This is the reality and, by the way, the violation of Article 1 of the Act on Presidential Elections, that prohibits any kind of forcing to vote. That is the violation which is not noticed and will not be noticed by the Central Election Commission”<sup>6</sup>.

The analysis of the electorate management practices in the Russian version reminds of the permanent inclination of authoritarian systems to violate basic human rights, freedom of choice, freedom of association, freedom of speech.

## WHAT DID NOT THE RUSSIANS CHOOSE?

Exactly one week after the end of “The President” operation, on 25 March this year, in Kemerovo (Кемерово) in Siberia, 64 people, mostly children, died in a fire at the „Winter Cherry” shopping center. The tragedy became a counterpoint to the presidential referendum, especially Putin's declarations regarding care for the prosperity and security of Russians. It turned out that the main reasons for this tragedy were the pathologies of everyday Russian life: the cynicism of power, corruption, greed, thievery, negligence, lack of responsibility for the life and health of citizens<sup>7</sup>.





**PEOPLE ATTEND A RALLY ORGANIZED VIA SOCIAL NETWORKS, IN MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS OF A FIRE IN THE KEMEROVO'S ZIMNYAYA VISHNYA SHOPPING CENTER AT THE PUSHKINSKAYA SQUARE IN CENTRAL MOSCOW, RUSSIA, 27 MARCH 2018.  
SOURCE: MAXIM SHIPENKOV (PAP/EPA)**

The tragedy in Kemerovo revealed a high level of public distrust towards the authorities and readiness for self-organization. Inhabitants of the city organized themselves searching for victims, gathering information about the causes of the tragedy and its course. They did not believe the local authorities, the police, the fire brigade, they disclosed their lies. According to many of them, the real cause of woes is the very essence of a corrupted system and a dysfunctional regime. Against this background, a slogan appeared on the Internet, a kind of a diagnosis: „Putin’s system is dangerous for Russia”<sup>8</sup>.

The Kremlin and its surroundings are of the opinion that Putin’s main goal in the new six-year term is to prepare a successor or conditions to extend his presidency: „By 2024, Putin must find a model for passing the power, its preservation or safe way for him to

step back. Today, it is difficult to determine the parameters of this model. The president must find the man that he was when he was

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preparing Boris Yeltsin for a change. At that time, his main function was to guarantee the security of the first president of Russia and his



family. If by 2024 such a person is not found, then Putin will become Putin's replacement. And how - an important, but only technical question"<sup>9</sup>.

The party of power and the president themselves emphasize the continuation of the autocratic political model of Russia, keeping

the oligarchic economic model alive and aggressive foreign policy, and for that purpose they increase the spending on cannons. This is not good news for the inhabitants of Kemerovo who symbolize the expectations and needs of Russians today. This is also bad information for Russia's neighbors.

<sup>1</sup> When journalists asked, among others Vladimir Putin, where there are soldiers in Crimea without identification insignia from, he replied that he did not know, and that today you can buy green uniforms in the supermarket. „Little green men” soon appeared in the East of Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> Andriej Kolesnikow, *Есть ли жизнь после выборов?*, Московский Центр Карнеги, 5.04.2018; <https://carnegie.ru/2018/04/05/ru-pub-75989> [access: 13.04.2018].

<sup>3</sup> Piotr Kozłow, Siergiej Goriaszko, Jelizawieta Focht, *„Самостоятельная девушка”: зачем Собчак встречалась с Путиным*, Русская служба Би-би-си/BBC, 14.10.2017; <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-41617325> [access: 13.04.2018].

<sup>4</sup> *Восемь кандидатов в президенты России. Кто эти люди – коротко*, Русская служба Би-би-си/BBC, 6.02.2018; <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42964894#orb-banner> [access: 13.04.2018].

<sup>5</sup> Piotr Kozłow, *Добрая машина пропаганды: Кремль создает инкубатор хороших новостей*, Русская служба Би-би-си/BBC, 13.10.2017; <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-41601374> [access: 13.04.2018].

<sup>6</sup> Andriej Kolesnikow, *На что получил мандат Владимир Путин*, Московский Центр Карнеги, 21.03.2018; <https://carnegie.ru/2018/03/21/ru-pub-75854> [access: 13.04.2018].

<sup>7</sup> Jelena Fanajłowa, *Цинизм: теория и практика*, Радио Свобода, 1.04.2018; <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29135919.html> [access: 13.04.2018].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Andriej Kolesnikow, *На что получил мандат Владимир Путин*, Московский Центр Карнеги, 21.03.2018; <https://carnegie.ru/2018/03/21/ru-pub-75854> [access: 13.04.2018].

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