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Presidential election in Russia: Putin's Stakhanovite record

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A presidential election was held in Russia on 18 March. As expected, it was won by Vladimir Putin, who garnered, according to official results, almost 77% of the votes; this being a record in the history of the Russian Federation. Voter turnout was reported to be in excess of 67%. Despite the feigned fairness and transparency of the election process (this effect was supposed to be achieved through declarations from the Central Election Committee ahead of the election), there were the traditional numerous violations of election procedure, including ostentatious forgeries.

This election was special both in terms of its significance for the Russian government system and because of the strategy of 'managing' the electorate adopted by the government (aimed above all at maximising turnout). The goals of the election process were: on the one hand to demonstrate that there is no alternative to Putin's leadership and to entrench his symbolic status of leader of the state and nation; and on the other hand, to strongly legitimise his victory. These goals have been achieved to a great extent. Both the preparations for the election and the course of the election showed that – no matter what real public support for Putin is (which is impossible to determine) – the Kremlin has total control of Russian politics. The election result will be used by the state propaganda in the coming years as *carte blanche* from the Russian public for his further moves in both foreign and domestic policy.

The main features of the election campaign

The election this year had a special symbolic meaning. The Kremlin's activity over the past few years has made it clear that the image of Putin as the leader who plays a historic role in the annals of the state and the nation is being consistently built (one of the means employed included rescheduling the election date for 18 March, the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea). Therefore, the campaign was organised by the Kremlin around the two key goals.

On the one hand, the course and the content of the campaign were intended to show that there was no alternative to Putin as compared to the other candidates. The means employed to achieve this goal included both the careful selection of his rivals (above all, eliminating the only strong representative of the opposition, Alexey Navalny, from the election) and positioning Putin not as a candidate in the election but almost exclusively as the incumbent president whose achievements so far made it pointless to consider a change of the country's leader. Once again, a powerful propaganda machine was used to show the distance existing between Putin and his rivals. Putin, principally, did not, in the strict sense,

run a campaign. For example, he did not publish his election manifesto. His moves and the media coverage formally were subordinated to the calendar of his presidential obligations. A disproportionately large share of information programmes in the state media were devoted to him. It was also no accident that the date of the annual presidential address, which contained numerous social promises, was shifted to early March, i.e. right ahead of the election. Furthermore, three documentaries published online in March glorified Putin in the context of his achievements in domestic policy (successfully combating the poverty and injustice of the 1990s) and on the international arena (bringing back great power status to Russia and the successful protection of citizens from the 'aggressive intentions' of the USA and NATO). On the day preceding the election, during electoral silence , Channel One of the national television broadcast a feature film *Crimea* presenting the developments in spring 2014 in a biased manner in accordance with the Kremlin's propaganda. In addition to this, since autumn 2017, the Russian government on all levels and the secret services have exploited, for the needs of the campaign, the topic of a threat to the state's sovereignty linked to an allegedly planned Western interference in the election process.

The state media were also 'managing' the images of the other candidates, depending on the Kremlin's propaganda needs. The candidate of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), Pavel Grudinin, became the target of unprecedentedly massive media attacks. He was accused, for example, of holding bank accounts abroad (pursuant to the regulations, a candidate for president has the obligation to close all such accounts at the moment of the registration of his/her candidacy at the latest). Even though he was not removed from the list of candidates, information to this effect appeared on posters at the polling stations, which was a legal peculiarity. The discrediting of Grudinin proved that he was seen as a threat to Putin – as public support for him turned out to be relatively high right after the start of his campaign . It cannot be ruled out that this move was also aimed at weakening support for the CPRF which, given the deteriorating financial situation of the people, may successfully mobilise public dissatisfaction using its well-developed party structures across the country.

Another important goal was to formally legitimise Putin's victory by ensuring the massive participation of voters in the election and by creating the appearance of the fairness and transparency of the election process. The Kremlin decided to make the election campaign more attractive by expanding the number of participants of the election when compared to 2012 and by a rejuvenation of this group. Proof of this included the fact that the traditional candidate of CPRF, Gennady Zyuganov, a Russian political veteran, chose not to run for the presidency, and the attempts made to utilise the liberal opposition electorate using the candidacy of Ksenia Sobchak, a celebrity and journalist, who is viewed by many as a clear 'Kremlin project'. The state apparatus was mobilised to an unprecedented extent in order to maximise voter turnout, employing both legal moves (a massive information campaign, including online and via text messages, making it possible to cast votes outside the permanent registered place of residence, and holding events for families with children, fairs with cheap food, etc. on election day) and illegal ones, including those under special instructions distributed via the structures of the 'government party', United Russia. The latter included above all entrusting the directors of large companies employing many people, education facilities (including universities) and medical centres with the task of guaranteeing that the employees reporting to them and even hospital patients took part in

the election. This often involved direct pressure which took the form of blackmail or threats in the case of failure to take part in the election (attempts at convincing them to vote for a given candidate were far less frequent). To mobilise voters significant pay rises were also given (even 100–200% higher) or bonuses were paid to school and academic teachers and hospital staff in the period preceding the election, formally as part of implementing Putin's 'May decrees' of 2012.

At the same time, the Central Election Committee appealed to the regional governments to prevent forgeries and other violations of regulations on election day. When compared to the preceding election, the criteria for the registration of observers at election commissions were softened, and promises were made to significantly increase the number of cameras that enable the voting process to be viewed online (all polling stations in Moscow were to be equipped with such cameras).

The regional governments, in parallel, took a number of preventive measures aimed at intimidating or isolating the possible organisers and participants in post-election protests. For example, in Saint Petersburg, before the election not only were the most active opposition activists (over 20 people) detained and received short sentences (5–25 days) but talks with school and university students were also held to make them aware of the consequences of participation in unsanctioned protests. Furthermore, attempts were made to paralyse the operation of Alexei Navalny's structures (including a provocation launched by the secret services against employees of his office in Kaliningrad) and of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia.

The course of the election

Regardless of the frequently repeated appeals from the Central Election Committee, **a significant number of violations, at times ostentatious, were revealed during the election and the vote count. According to preliminary information from Golos, the organisation which monitored the election, the violations were still less numerous than in 2012** (most of them took place before voting began), and co-operation between the Central Election Committee and independent observers improved significantly (the Central Election Committee effectively reacted to violations in some cases, for example, in those cases when additional ballots were cast). However, the exposed forgeries have so far led to the cancellation of voting only at seven polling stations.

The most frequent voting violations included: ballot stuffing (even though cameras were present at the polling stations), bringing organised groups of voters (usually employees of a given company) to the polling stations indicated by the government as an element of the system forcing people to vote and turnout verification, and impeding the independent observation of the election – for example, preventing observers from entering polling stations or impeding/preventing their work contrary to regulations. In some cases false observers allegedly representing opposition candidates were introduced to election commissions. There were also cases of state officials illegally campaigning for Putin, of fixing cameras where it was impossible to watch the election process and also 'voting carousels.' This term describes a process wherein the same people cast votes several times at various polling stations (a great number of violations of this kind were revealed, for example, in Saint Petersburg). This time it was easier to organise the 'carousels' since the

voting system had been liberalised to allow people to vote outside their permanent registered place of residence in order to increase the turnout. According to information from the Central Election Committee, almost six million eligible voters made use of this opportunity, and this might have a very significant impact in the context of electoral manipulations. Contradictory information from the Central Election Committee concerning the number of people authorised to vote gives rise to numerous doubts. Contrary to information provided right ahead of the election by the president of the Central Election Committee concerning the new number of those authorised to vote (the number was reduced by 1.5 million), their number as announced by the Central Election Committee after the election did not take the change into account.

The vote count procedure was not transparent, either. Frequently reported cases included: forging reports compiled in polling stations before they were forwarded to the higher level commissions, not allowing observers to be present during the vote count and repressing those observers who reported irregularities. At some polling stations manipulations on a large scale most likely happened, one proof of which is the information regarding individual cases where the reports were forged to show a result that differed by double-digits in percentage terms.

According to official data, after almost 100% of the reports had been counted, **Putin garnered 76.69%** of the votes, and **turnout was 67.47%.** The support for Pavel Grudinin reportedly was at 11.77%, Vladimir Zhirinovsky from LDPR was 5.65%, and Ksenia Sobchak received 1.68%. These data were most likely partly forged, although the scale of the manipulation is difficult to assess. According to information from the Golos foundation based on data from almost 2,200 reports compiled in polling stations sent by independent observers, the turnout was 62%, and Putin received 71.09% of the votes. According to estimates from independent observers operating as part of Alexei Navalny's structures, the turnout was 55%. The results in Moscow, where the anti-Putin electorate is still relatively strong, were the greatest surprise. Officially, the turnout in Moscow reached almost 60%, and support for Putin was almost 71%. The regions distinguished by the highest official support for Putin (above 90%) were traditionally the Northern Caucasian republics (Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan) and Tuva, as well as Crimea and Sevastopol.

What does the election result mean?

The official result surpassed both the most optimistic forecasts and pre-election polls (forecasted support did not exceed 75%) and the exit poll results published by the governmental research centre WCIOM (73.9%), and were the closest to the exit poll results provided by the governmental centre FOM (76.3%). Data from pre-election polls were incomplete as the only independent polling organisation, the Levada Centre, did not take part in public opinion surveys concerning the election because the government had imposed 'foreign agent' status on it. **Regardless of what the real scale of violation was (which is difficult to assess as it is impossible to determine the real public support for the president) the Kremlin has achieved its political goals.** Although even the unprecedented mobilisation of the state administration apparatus and the media to improve turnout failed to ensure the result that was viewed as ideal by the Kremlin (around 70%), the record-high level of official support for Putin and the record-high official number of the votes he received (over 56

million) will be something the Kremlin propaganda will capitalise on to demonstrate the unity of the nation and the government in the face of both the conflict with the West and the tough socio-economic situation at home. The manner in which the election campaign was conducted has revealed once again the weakness and fragmentation of the opposition, and the election result has proven that the government has full control of the political process.

The official voting results in occupied Crimea (support for Putin exceeding 90%, which was clearly higher than the average in Russia) will be used by the Kremlin as an argument legitimising its annexation.

The record-high support in the election has strengthened the image of Putin as a leader of historic significance for Russia. Furthermore, it offers him *carte blanche* in both foreign and domestic policy. According to the constitution in force, Putin should step down in 2024. However, most likely, the Kremlin's plan was to make the style and the result of the election this year give Putin a strong mandate to remain in power for life and to conduct in the coming years and without obstruction a constitutional reform towards this goal.