



Russian Presidential Elections — As Predictable As a Bad Movie Script

On March 18, the world will find out (yet again) that Russian President Vladimir Putin is elected for another presidential term, his fourth. According to polls, he is expected to win at least 70 percent of the vote. Many already consider the 65-year-old leader as the eternal ruler of the country, copying the governing style of his communist predecessors. And to many Russians this is just fine, as long as there is “order” in the country and the country is strong. By “order,” many Russians mean that which existed during communist years — the strong hand of centralized government control. The Russian psyche also considers order to mean “lack of change”; many Russians are terrified of political change, because in their country it usually comes with blood, lawlessness, terror, and anarchy. Most Russians equate a “strong” country with military might and gaining more geopolitical territory. Indeed, this is reflected in, and is a product of, the mass media and education in the country. Since there are almost no independent media in Russia, virtually all media transmit the same message, e.g., how much better off Russia is after taking Crimea, how Eastern Ukraine is “fighting” for independence (when it is a known fact that the separatism is carried out by Russian troops in Donbas), etc. There are interview broadcasts on TV every day with “happy” citizens who say Russia is getting greater because it is taking back “what belongs to it.” The mass culture and education are saturated with patriotic rhetoric — that Russia will overrun Germany again (if needed) and that it is ready to fight. Actors, singers, dancers, artists, and educators are employed to spread this vision of Putin, the leader who “brought Russia





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back to its feet.”

Any serious discontent in Russia today is met with severe censorship and government repression. For instance, in 2011, after massive protests against Putin and his permanent occupancy of the presidential office, the Parliament passed a series of repressive laws against civic rights. These laws criminalized unauthorized protests with fines of up to \$9,000. Spontaneous protests were virtually outlawed. In 2014, Putin signed a new law that raised the fines for unsanctioned multiple protests even higher — to \$28,000. With an average monthly salary in the country of \$500, such fines could ruin one’s livelihood. On top of that, with this law, protesters could be sentenced to prison terms. All of this was justified as a “fight against radicalism.” Putin initiated a huge crackdown on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), introducing restrictive measures on their operation in the country and constant government oversight. The Putin government has practically eradicated independent media, passing laws to ban advertising on cable and satellite channels, and prohibiting foreign ownership of media that exceeds 20 percent. One of the very few independent TV channels — Dozhd (Rain) TV — operates out of a small studio the size of an apartment. Internet freedom in Russia is also affected; the government may shut down websites that “violate Russia law,” and what exactly constitutes a “violation” is unclear. Such laws could block sites if “they promote mass rioting, encouraging illegal activities and participation in public events held in violation of established order.” Many sites have been taken down under such pretext.

At the moment, Russia fits the description of a “captured authoritarian state,” where Putin has been in power since 1999 — either as president or as prime minister. After his first two consecutive four-year presidential terms ended in 2008, he switched places with the prime minister for four years, and it was during this time that he crafted a change to the country’s constitution to extend the presidential term to six years. In 2012, he again was elected president, now for a six-year term. He is currently seeking reelection for a second six-year term as president. During his years in power, a whole generation of young Russians grew up without knowing any other head of state, and without having a chance to compare Putin’s leadership to anyone else’s. On March 18, Putin’s endless presidency will continue.

But there is a catch: Although Putin’s victory is assured and he will win the elections by a landslide (his closest opponent is predicted to get less than 10 percent of the vote), his regime is seriously worried about low election turnout. There are indications that many voters will boycott the elections in order not to give Putin the legitimacy he seeks.

Millions of Russians are tired, disappointed, and angry with Putin for his failure to address corruption, for being a part of an oligarchic model of governance, for Russia’s international isolation and growing military rhetoric, and for turning back to the nation’s communist past for patriotic inspiration. This can be seen in the fact that, despite the restrictions put in place by Putin, mass protests still take place —such as the one on January 28 of this year. Despite Putin’s claims of how great Russia is, the country has endured declining wages and high inflation for several years in a row, forcing Russians to save aggressively owing to the lowered standard of living.

Since Russian authorities prevented Alexei Navalny — Putin’s strongest rival — to run for president, the discontent with Putin’s government grew even stronger. Navalny — a lawyer and a prominent and very popular opponent of the Kremlin, who criticizes the ruling political elite for widespread corruption and abuse of power — was denied entering the presidential race over an embezzlement conviction, which he claims was fabricated by the Putin regime in order to harass him. Although Navalny — a pro-Western politician who wants to move Russia away from its totalitarian past — would not have had a chance to win, his widespread support, especially among younger, urbanized, and educated people, would have



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greatly undermined Putin's regime.

After Navalny was banned from entering the elections, he urged citizens to boycott the vote. And many intend to do so. Despite the fact that official polling agencies suggest that voter turnout will be over 70 percent, independent agencies predict that the turnout might be less than 30 percent. Once Putin's government saw those data, it banned the independent agency from operating for the elections. In a highly manipulated and controlled election environment, low turnout is the only wild card that can hurt Putin — not only at home, but also on the international stage. A turnout lower than in previous years will be a huge embarrassment for Putin.

Besides Putin, there are seven other presidential "candidates" who are part of the election farce, none of whom will even come close to Putin at the polls; they are in the race to legitimize his win. No serious opponent would have been allowed to challenge him.

Three of the seven other "candidates" deserve mention, as they will receive some of the votes not going to Putin. The new leader of the Communist Party — Pavel Grudinin, 57 — is expected to take second place with around seven percent of the vote. He is seen as a good capitalist-communist critical of Putin's elite and is for turning privatized businesses into social enterprises. The candidate expected to come third is Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the Liberal Democratic Party — a far-right nationalist with incessant military rhetoric against the West. Zhirinovskiy has been part of Russia's political establishment for decades, and he is expected to get about five percent of the vote. There is one woman running in this election — Ksenia Sobchak, the 36-year-old media personality and socialite who is a staunch critic of Putin — pushing a liberal western agenda. Some think she may get some of the vote from young people who would have voted for Navalny had he been allowed to run. Sobchak's father was a former St. Petersburg mayor who, interestingly, was Putin's mentor. Rich and privileged, Ksenia was born into the world of the political elite. Her critics say she is being used to give the elections legitimacy, making them appear as if they are fair by allowing a "real Putin foe" to run. In a televised presidential debate (without Putin), she and Zhirinovskiy got into an ugly fight, in which she threw a glass of water at Zhirinovskiy after he called her many profanities. Sobchak is not expected to receive more than two percent of the vote.

By contrast, during the past several months the entire government machine has been working on polishing Putin's image. An army of media outlets and personalities has been put into service praising Putin as Russia's only choice. Although Putin never went to a single presidential debate or met with opponents, his political "vision" is being presented to voters in many forms of glamorous media coverage with exalted supporters from all over the country and from all walks of life. Even children are being used as a propaganda tool in this political masquerade. The national praises of Putin are reaching the point of hysteria, resembling the all-too-familiar personality cult during the days of Soviet communism. At a recent "cultural" event Putin attended, children on stage recited poems about him. One girl read a poem saying, "I may decide to study the German language, only for the reason, our president speaks it," and, "As long as there is Putin, I am not afraid of anything."

Regrettably, Putin's campaign message boils down to military rhetoric and patriotic statements about Russia's greatness, and threats to those "who want to weaken it." Reminiscent of the old communist days, a recently released documentary about Putin entitled *The World Order* shows the leader as the nation's savior. In the film, Putin laments the breakdown of the Soviet Union, saying he would have never allowed it. He regrets that Russia "allowed" Germany's reunification, and he proudly talks about his days in the KGB — where he was in charge of recruiting operatives. He also blames the United



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States and the West for not dissolving NATO and for “attempts to make Russia weak again.” All this sounds like déjà vu for the many people who remember the political slogans of the Soviet era.

As mentioned above, many critics of Putin’s regime say they will not vote. “I will vote, only when there is a real choice,” says Anatoly Ryabov, a 22-year-old university student in Moscow. Many protesters say the same thing, namely, that there is no point in voting when the outcome is always the same. Indeed, the outcome has been the same for almost two decades. “Young people are losing patience with this situation and are more vocal about their discontent with the Putin government,” says Igor Danilevsky, a professor at the Moscow Research University.

Some people say that Russia today is a boiling pot under pressure that could unexpectedly explode. According to Leon Aron, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Russia has endured a prolonged slow strangulation of its society through repressive laws limiting civil activism, political dissent, and independent media.

How soon (and whether) Russia’s society might attempt to loosen this grip remains to be seen.

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