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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka • Anna Maria Dynier • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Marcin Terlikowski • Tomasz Żornaczuk

Putin's Elections

Agnieszka Legucka

On 18 March, Vladimir Putin was named the winner of the presidential election in Russia, as predicted. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), however, reports it found many irregularities in the course of the vote. International affairs played an important role in the mobilisation of the electorate around the president. Putin's fourth term will be characterised by worsening relations with the U.S., attempts to break EU unity, and the politics of antagonising Russia's neighbours, including Poland and Ukraine.

Putin for the Fourth Time. The Russian Federation's Central Election Commission reported that 76.66% of Russians voted for Putin. Opposition candidates were too weak to pose a threat to the incumbent president. Pavel Grudinin, a representative of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, received 11.8% of the votes, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, 5.66%, Ksenia Sobchak, of Civic Initiative, with 1.67%, and Grigory Yavlinsky from the Yabloko party, 1.04% (all others received less than 1%). Alexei Navalny, who was forbidden to run in the election, had announced a boycott, calling on Russian citizens to stay in their homes. According to official data, the turnout amounted to 67.49%, which is slightly less than predicted by the Russian authorities (70%). Putin's success as announced by Russian media is undermined by the OSCE evaluation, which found violations throughout the electoral process.

The election was intended to show that Russians, despite the Western sanctions, falling standards of living, and decreasing real incomes (to the 2007 level) still support the Putin's policy. During the campaign, Putin was identified with the development of Russia and its international position, summed up in his election slogan, "strong president—strong Russia." The campaign's staff focused on turnout. The last place the president visited during the campaign was symbolic—Crimea, which Russia annexed four years ago (according to official results, Putin received 92% of the votes there).

Putin used both the central and regional administration, as well as media to support his campaign. In schools and universities, lecturers encouraged the young to vote and discouraged them from Navalny's ideas. Although Putin was running as an independent candidate, he was supported by the ruling party, United Russia.

A new area of activity of the campaign was the internet and social media, important for the mobilisation of young voters. The campaign strategists focused on the most important websites in Russia, namely Instagram, wKontakte, and Odnoklasniki. They used methods tested during the elections in the U.S. and in Western European countries. Trolls focused on politics were used to agitate on social networks. However, these activities seemed ineffective, with support in February this year in big cities, where the largest number of internet users are, support for Putin dropped by 12% (to 57.1%).

Foreign Policy as a Mobilisation Factor. International issues played an important role in Putin's campaign. Russia's policy of confrontation with the West has helped it to consolidate the public around the incumbent leader. Some 66% of Russians think their country has many enemies abroad and approves of its assertive foreign policy. The Russian authorities also used the U.S. Treasury Department's so-called "Kremlin list,"

which included 210 people from the Russian political and business elite, published in January this year, to mobilise voters. With the people on the list potentially facing new sanctions, pro-Kremlin media made a point of saying the goal of the U.S. is to split Putin from his closest colleagues. In the middle of February, the U.S. Justice Department indicted 13 Russians, including the owner of a “troll factory” in St. Petersburg, Yevgeny Prigozhin, for interference in the American elections in 2016 (a month later, individual sanctions were imposed on them). In addition, despite Putin’s assurances that Russia was winning and achieving its political goals in Syria (in December 2017), Russians were surprised by the deaths of scores of Russian mercenaries in the country after attacking a U.S.-backed base and then coming under heavy air attack in response (on 7–8 February this year).

Putin tried to use the tensions in relations with the U.S. to mobilise the Russian electorate. On 1 March, he gave his annual address to both houses of parliament (postponed specifically to the campaign),¹ in which he stressed the state’s military strength. Presenting new types of weapons, Putin declared he would counteract the strategic imbalance between Russia and the U.S., including by withdrawing from the anti-ballistic missile treaty (which restricts the development of such systems) and building an anti-missile shield.

Perspectives. Putin’s fourth and constitutionally mandated last term as president is a challenge to the stability of the Russian elite and its succession. Given the lack of consensus on structural reforms in the country, the elite will continue to build public support around foreign policy. The president’s external activities will continue to enhance his credibility within the country. In the short term, positive signals may appear, especially before football’s World Cup, which will be held in Russia this year. However, the long-term task of Russia’s external policy will be to force NATO and the EU to make concessions to Russia. Its anti-West politics will be beneficial to the ruling elite, since it will contribute to increased spending on special services, the defence industry, and technological development of the state. This will mean state contracts from which the president’s associates can reap rewards (such as the general director and good acquaintance of Putin, Sergey Czumozov, from the Russian state armaments company Rostec). What is more, it has been announced that by 2020 at least 20% of expenditures will be spent on defence and 13% on security (though the details are classified).

The rivalry between Russia and the U.S. will be more visible. Russia will continue to try to undermine NATO credibility, both in Europe and in the Middle East (an example is Turkey’s announcement about the purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems).² In Ukraine, the Russian side will strive to prolong the peace process to gain the greatest influence over Ukrainian authorities. In addition, it will use the antagonism between Ukraine and Poland (and Hungary) over historical issues and the Ukrainian minority in Poland.

In relations with the EU, Russia will continue to prefer bilateral contact, especially with Germany and Italy. Of key importance will be the implementation of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, because it will strengthen the EU’s dependence on Russian energy supplies. Russia also appears to seek a “hard” Brexit, which would weaken the European project and force EU institutions to engage in internal processes at the expense of external-facing projects such as the Eastern Partnership.

Russia’s relations with Britain will further deteriorate. After the assassination attempt on Sergei Skripal, a GRU double agent for British intelligence, and his daughter on 14 March this year, Prime Minister Theresa May accused Russia of using an outlawed gas on British territory and expelled 23 Russian diplomats, among other measures. In response, Russia announced it would expel 23 British diplomats, close the British consulate general in St. Petersburg and ordered the British Council to cease operations in the country. In addition, the Russian authorities have threatened that if the British government bans Russia Today television in the UK, it will respond against the BBC.

Conclusions for the EU and NATO. The continuation of Putin’s rule will sharpen the existing antagonism between Russia and some Western countries. Relations with the Russian Federation have entered a phase of confrontation that requires NATO and EU states to be even more cohesive and show unity. Dialogue with the Russian authorities is advisable, but cooperation and consultation between the members are crucial for maintaining the credibility of NATO and the EU. In addition to the needed strengthening of NATO’s Eastern Flank, national governments may consider developing methods to counteract Russia’s non-military influence. This applies, among others, to stopping its interference in electoral processes, causing unrest on social networks and the wider internet, supporting extreme groups in Europe, as well as the possibility of further assassinations and political attacks. Thus, it is necessary to increase control over banking and business transactions involving Russian capital, limit Russian oligarchs obtaining EU citizenship (e.g., Cyprus and Malta) and concealing assets abroad by the Russian elite (in the UK, France, Spain, Czech Republic, Bulgaria). This will reduce Russian influence in the EU and reduce the freedom and wealth of the Russian elite outside of their country.

¹ A. Legucka, “Putin’s Presidential Address: Plan for His Fourth Term,” *PISM Spotlight*, no. 12/2018, 2 March 2018.

² K. Wasilewski, “Turkey’s Purchase of the S-400 System: Prospects and Consequences,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 81 (1021), 1 September 2017.