

# Putin's election as president signals authoritarian turn in Russia

**Vladimir Volkov****30 March 2000**

Vladimir Putin won the Russian presidential elections on March 26. With 52.6 percent of the votes cast, he was far in front of his opponents and so avoided a run-off. In second place came Gennady Zyuganov, chairman of the Communist Party of Russia (CPRF), with 29.3 percent, and third was Grigori Yavlinski, chairman of the liberal-democratic "Yabloko" party, with 5.8 percent. At 68.8 percent, turnout exceeded the 50 percent necessary for a valid presidential election.

Apart from some irregularities, the elections are regarded as having been run properly by political forces within Russia and international observers. Nevertheless, there are many indications that the outcome was manipulated by the state.

The election of Putin heralds a qualitatively new stage in the political and social life of post-Soviet Russia. A man who was almost unknown in August of last year, and who possesses no independent political biography, has filled the highest state post, with its immeasurable plenipotentiary powers. Former KGB officer Putin reached the pinnacle of state power exclusively through the machinations of the Kremlin apparatus.

Politically, Putin's presidency means the end of the period of capitalist reforms associated with the name of Boris Yeltsin. During his predecessor's reign, the redistribution of the publicly-owned wealth of the former Soviet Union into the hands of a thin layer of new private property owners was completed on a scale and speed previously unknown in history. This was bound up with illusions that the influence of the capitalist world market on Russia's economic development would bring prosperity for the wider population. Now this is replaced by ever more convulsive and desperate attempts to consolidate the position of the new private property owners by strengthening the state apparatus and kindling nationalist tendencies within society.

The question, what policies will Putin implement as a president of Russia, can only be answered by examining the social forces he represents. The Kremlin spread the myth that Putin was keeping his distance from both the large oligarchs, as well as the power elite in the Kremlin.

According to them, Putin wanted to take serious action against the corruption and criminality that penetrate the entire state apparatus and business. On the other hand, as a "man of the state," Putin would concern himself with the well being of the ordinary population.

In reality, Putin is the representative and protégé of an extremely thin layer of nouveaux-riche that has developed over the last years, and those sections of the bureaucracy who profit from private capital. Putin's success means strengthening the "reform course" and maintaining the "continuity" of a policy whose foundations were laid under Yeltsin.

Putin is closely connected to the so-called "Berezovsky-Abramovitch clan", one of the most important groups of capitalists, occupying dominant positions within many areas of the Russian economy and at the highest levels of state. Putin is the progeny of this group, he is *their* president. What many Russian oligarchs could only dream about over the last years has now become a reality. They not only have their own people in key positions in the government, parliament or in the administration, but they now have their own man occupying the highest post in the country. Putin is the president who was, in effect, privatised by one of the most powerful clans inside the new Russian ruling class.

The oligarch Boris Berezovsky has long ago formulated the fundamental credo of his profiteering: why buy an enterprise, if one can appoint its director? If this logic is applied in greater measure it means: in order to control the most important economic resources of a country, you have to make the president your own man. There can be no talk of "keeping a distance" from the oligarchs.

Putin's proximity to a particular clan does not necessarily mean that the other oligarchs are driven to the wall. That would be an over simplification of a strategy which calls for careful and balanced action. Nevertheless, there can be no doubting the fact that the tendency to "shake up" the new ruling class will continue. Because of the narrowing of the general economic base, a number of influential figures of the Yeltsin period have lost or are about to lose their positions.

This process is not about removing the power of the clans, but concerns which of them can adapt to the changed conditions with least pain, and which cannot.

Why are there no protests or open talk about what is taking place by the Russian mass media, politicians and commentators?

Some submit to the illusion they are able to influence Putin along their own lines. Others are simply afraid that their protest would bring a repressive response. The fact that the president achieved his post exclusively through conducting the war in Chechnya does not disturb their hopes.

Moreover, the balance of forces developed in the Yeltsin period has now been destroyed. The milestones in the transition to the new period were the August 1998 financial crisis; the Kremlin's reaction to the NATO war against Yugoslavia in spring 1999; the beginning of the second war in Chechnya and Yeltsin's resignation at the end of last year.

Before Putin was elected president and Berezovsky and Co were acknowledged as the most powerful oligarchs, there were at least two attempts to shift the earlier balance of forces in favour of other influential groups. The first attempt came from the patriotic alliance and Zyuganov's CPRF. At the beginning of 1999 they had tried to implement impeachment proceedings against president Yeltsin with the support of the then Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Then another group tried under the leadership of Moscow mayor Yuri Lushkov and the, by then, dismissed Primakov. They were defeated during the parliamentary elections last December. They all now bow down before the new winner.

What are the political consequences of this new balance of power?

Putin has maintained his grip on power by seeking to recreate a repressive state apparatus, advocating a nationalist orientation in foreign policy and rehabilitating those aspects of the Soviet past that are connected with the totalitarian machinery of oppression created by Stalin. At the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, these features of the past came under strong criticism and, it then appeared, were finally condemned by Russian public opinion.

Putin embodies and completes the nationalist turn taken by the ruling elite over the last years. He has integrated three tendencies in his policies, represented by the three fundamental currents of political life in "new Russia".

The first tendency is cultivated by the "red nationalism" of Zyuganov's Communist Party. It lives on memories of Stalin's regime as well as the mystification of the "Russian soul" and the special, civilising role of the Russian state.

The second tendency is embodied by the movement lead by Grigori Yavlinski and his "Yabloko" party. It lives on illusions, according to which capitalism is the highest stage of worldwide social development, and relies on the false

equating of capitalism and democracy. Accordingly, the development of capitalism naturally and inevitably brings with it the development of democratic structures of rule.

The last current represents anti-communist nationalism and is incarnated in the party of Vladimir Zhirinovsky. It rests on aggressive xenophobia, chauvinism, fanatical imperial ambitions and fascist demagogery.

These political currents form the three cornerstones of the pyramid of power, which crystallized in post-Soviet Russia. Putin ascended to power by protecting the general interests of each of these tendencies from the standpoint of the "state" — or more precisely the thin layer of the nouveaux riche. The most important secret of his popularity lies in this "synthesis". With Putin, the Russian ruling class has temporarily consolidated itself on the basis of its common enmity towards the broad mass of the population at home, and fear of globalised world capital abroad.

Why do the leading capitalist governments in the West support Putin?

The "Russian bear" is not so easily tamed. It is still able to show its teeth and defend its interests. It is still too dangerous to confront directly.

The "urge for a strong pair of hands" is not only a Russian phenomenon. In supporting Putin and his regime, the leading world powers are trying to prepare public opinion in their own countries for the application of "hard measures" against the working class. This is necessary throughout the world, in order to ensure the transnational corporations' freedom of action.

Finally, in Putin the West recognises the right of Russian capitalism to autonomy within the framework of "world society" and its justification for using extreme force in the struggle against "international terrorism", or against anything that might endanger the existing world order.



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