

Putin-Medvedev tandem wins presidential election in Russia

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The presidential elections held March 2 in Russia ended, as expected, in a victory for the tandem made up of the departing president, Vladimir Putin, and the former vice premier, Dmitry Medvedev.

Medvedev, the Kremlin's main candidate, personally chosen by Putin as his successor and supported by the administrative, financial and media resources of the authoritarian Russian regime, won in the first round of voting by a wide margin over three other candidates.

According to data from the Central Election Committee, with 99.5 percent of the ballots counted Medvedev had won 70.23 percent of the votes; Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party, had won 17.76 percent; the head of the right-wing nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, had obtained 9.37 percent; and the leader of the tiny Democratic Party, Andrei Bogdanov, had polled 1.29 percent.

Voter turnout was 69.61 percent, a bit lower than the previous presidential election in 2004. But the Kremlin deemed the overall result sufficient to provide the appearance of legitimacy in the transfer of presidential power.

The election campaign took place under conditions of gross violations of elementary democratic procedures, similar to those which occurred in the parliamentary (Duma) elections held last December. In the earlier elections, the victory of the Kremlin-bureaucratic party "United Russia" was achieved with the aid of "administrative resources" and fraud.

In several regions the number of those voting in December reached nearly 100 percent, and in some places the official turnout even exceeded the maximum possible. At the conclusion of the elections to the Duma, nearly 200 of the 450 newly elected deputies handed over their mandates to other people. In their stead, deputy governors, mayors and other representatives, for whom no one had voted, became deputies.

The parliamentary elections were declared "a vote of confidence in Putin," and the subsequent propaganda campaign was built around the proposition that the Russian people had already "made their choice," which now had simply to be formalized with regard to the presidential candidate who had been selected by Putin.

The procedure of nominating and registering candidates for

president in Russia at the present time is both repressive and forbidding, making it practically impossible for a figure who is not approved by the authorities to appear on the ballot.

Some three weeks were allocated for nominating candidates, during which time a prospective candidate had to prepare and conduct a meeting of no less than 500 citizens. One of the leaders of the liberal opposition, former world chess champion Garry Kasparov, was not able to hold such a meeting because the administrative building where space had been rented suddenly annulled the contract. Kasparov, who has no problems with money, was not able to find another place in Moscow, and was forced to cancel his candidacy.

The second stage was the gathering of 2 million signatures nationwide, which had to be accomplished by the middle of January. The first two weeks of the new year in Russia are holidays, and many people spend the time at home or on vacation.

It is virtually impossible to gather the required number of signatures within the designated period. As a result, the election lists submitted are, for the most part, fake, allowing the authorities to disqualify candidates they consider to be unsuitable.

That is what happened with Mikhail Kasyanov, who was the premier during Putin's first term as president in 2000-2004, and who now is one of the main representatives of the liberal opposition. Retaining his old authority in the state apparatus, and enjoying the support of big business, Kasyanov is viewed by the Kremlin as a dangerous opponent.

The Central Election Committee found that around 15 percent of his ballot papers were invalid, while the allowed number is 5 percent.

On the other hand, the election committee ruled that Andrei Bogdanov, a candidate supported by the Kremlin as a lure for the liberally inclined electorate, passed muster with only 3 percent invalid signatures. The party headed by Bogdanov had received a total of 90,000 votes in the parliamentary elections. This did not prevent him from collecting the necessary signatures to run for president—a number more than twenty times the votes his party had just received.

Medvedev's election campaign was, in fact, an undertaking conducted by the state apparatus. His staff was run by the head

of the president's administration, Sergei Sobyanin, and the heads of the majority of regional staffs were deputy governors. The first conference of the leaders of Medvedev's regional headquarters was held in the building that houses the Russian president's offices on Moscow's Old Square—the bastion of the former Soviet bureaucracy.

Medvedev refused to appear personally at the reception held for the candidate's registration certification, even though he was in Moscow. He also refused to participate in the television debates.

He conducted his entire campaign while remaining at the post of vice premier and repeatedly appearing in public with President Putin. He participated in several important international meetings, in particular, the signing of the pact with Serbia on the construction of gas pipeline branches for the "South Stream."

The amount of television coverage Medvedev enjoyed was three times greater than that of all the other candidates, whose television debates were broadcast early in the morning and late at night.

All of this was calculated to convince the voters that Medvedev was not a candidate competing against others, but rather the inevitable winner for whom there was no alternative.

The final trump card employed by the Kremlin was the formation within the Central Election Committee, five days before the election, of a so-called "working group." Members of this body, which was not provided for by law, were limited to representatives of the ruling party, United Russia. The "working group" was given the exclusive right to count and verify the actual ballots.

All of these efforts produced the desired results. Even without them, Medvedev might have won by a substantial margin. However, the Kremlin higher-ups understand well that the real moods in society are replete with feelings of dissatisfaction which could find sudden expression if the bulldog grip from above were relaxed.

An important factor in realizing the Kremlin's plans was the political prostration of all of the other political forces and their readiness to accept the rules of the game as dictated from above.

None of the parties of official Russian politics—be they liberals or Russian nationalists—represent the interests of the workers. They serve instead as instruments in the hands of one or another layer of the ruling oligarchy and upper bureaucracy. They fear the growing discontent from below more than the humiliation they receive at the hands of the authoritarian Kremlin powers.

Medvedev's election campaign proceeded under the slogan of "continuing Putin's course," and was accompanied by a flood of demagoguery and lies. Using favorable macroeconomic indicators and the strengthened position of Russian capitalism on the international arena—as a result of the vast inflation in energy prices—Medvedev and Putin claimed that their economic

"success" benefited not only the upper crust, but also wide layers of society.

Thus, in speaking last month at a session of the State Council, Putin declared: "We must free the country from the vicious practice of making state decisions under the pressure of natural resource and finance monopolies, of media magnates, foreign political circles and unbridled populists, where not only the national interest, but the elementary demands of millions of people are cynically ignored."

Meanwhile, a central result of Putin's rule has been a vast growth in social inequality and the impoverishment of significant layers of society.

In an opinion piece in the March 3 edition of the government newspaper *Russian Gazette*, Evgeny Gontmakher, head of the Center of Social Policy at the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Science, wrote that "the quality of life has declined for the majority of the population (even those considered moderately well-off)."

"Thus, in particular," he continued, "quality health care and education to an ever greater extent must be paid for. In addition, people are forced to pay unofficially. As a result, only 15-20 percent of the population are able to maintain their health at a decent level and give their children a competitive education... The rest are forced to vegetate."

Gontmakher noted one more "troubling fact:" the ratio of the average pension to the average wage in Russia is constantly decreasing, and has now fallen to less than 25 percent, where the minimum norm is 40 percent.

In contrast, the Russian oligarchs are becoming ever wealthier. The journal *Finance*, in its yearly survey, noted that in one year the wealth of Oleg Deripaska, the most successful Russian businessman, almost doubled, and has reached \$40 billion. In recent years, the number of dollar billionaires in Russia has almost doubled—from 61 to 101 people.



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