

Putin wins Russian presidential election

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Outgoing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin claimed victory in Russia's presidential elections held Sunday. Last night the Central Election Commission (CEC) reported that he had so far secured 65 percent of the vote, with about two-thirds of all precincts reporting (as of the writing of this article).

Exit polls conducted by VTsIOM, one of Russia's leading public opinion research firms, and other agencies also reported a win for Putin with about 60 percent of the vote.

The outcome is in line with predictions made in the lead-up to the elections, although there had been some uncertainty as to whether Putin would avoid a second-round runoff. The Kremlin has been facing anti-government protests since December, when parliamentary elections widely believed to have been rigged in favor of the ruling party sparked an outpouring of popular discontent.

Turnout in Sunday's election appears to have been substantial, with 64 percent of the electorate going to the polls. This number may rise as more votes are counted. If it holds, it would represent an increase of four percent over the parliamentary contest in December 2011, but a decrease of six percent from the 2008 presidential race.

Putin held a victory rally just outside the Kremlin on Sunday evening attended by tens of thousands. There was a massive police presence, with 6,000 additional officers brought in for the event.

According to preliminary results, Putin's opponents in the presidential race trailed significantly behind, with Gennady Zyuganov of the Communist Party being the closest competitor at 17.7 percent of the vote. Multi-

billionaire oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, allied with the liberal opposition, won 9.2 percent of ballots cast, slightly more than far-right ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy at 8.5 percent. Sergei Mironov of the Just Russia party came in last at 4.8 percent.

There have been thousands of allegations of vote fraud from various corners of the country, with upwards of 20,000 observers stationed around the country. According to the election watchdog Golos, so-called "carouseling"—the bussing of voters from one polling station to the next so they could vote multiple times using absentee ballots—was reported in Moscow, Vladivostok, Voronezh and numerous other cities.

Other complaints include tampering with ballot boxes, the absence of ballot papers, broken surveillance cameras, the removal of observers from polling places, ballot-box stuffing, voting by proxy, and voter harassment.

Thus far, Golos has indicated that the scale of reported violations appears to be somewhat less than in the December parliamentary elections. Given the outpouring of discontent provoked by the 2011 contests, the Kremlin may have decided to curtail some of its most egregious and blatant activities in this regard.

Opposition leaders have denounced Sunday's election results as fraudulent and are calling for a mass protest in Moscow on Monday evening. "These elections are not free," insisted Mikhail Kasyanov, a former Putin cabinet member who has since come out against the Kremlin. "We will not accept the president as legitimate," he promised.

Alexei Navalny, the anti-corruption blogger who

blends criticism of the Kremlin with appeals to right-wing nationalism and is being widely promoted by the liberal opposition and the Western press, has also denounced the results. He called for an intensification of anti-government protests.

“There have been a huge number of reports of falsifications. It is already absolutely clear that these falsifications cannot be denied and that these are not elections, that the vote count will not be the truth,” insisted Navalny on Sunday.

The election results reveal the narrow base of support for the opposition forces that have dominated the anti-government protests of the last two months. Despite widespread popular discontent over declining living standards, state corruption and illegality, and the Kremlin’s authoritarian methods, none of the supposed alternatives to Putin garnered significant electoral support.

Undoubtedly, the exclusion of political opponents from the election by way of bureaucratic methods, vote rigging, and the domination of the media by the state played a part in shaping the outcome of Sunday’s vote.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that the political agenda of the right-wing layers leading the anti-Kremlin crusade is viewed with skepticism by wide sections of the working class. Workers are wary of giving their vote to forces associated with the free-market mania that destroyed social conditions in the country during the 1990s, when the Soviet bureaucracy liquidated the Soviet Union.

The candidacy, for example, of Mikhail Prokhorov—a billionaire who made his wealth by privatizing state assets under Yeltsin in the post-Soviet era—failed to resonate with millions of Russian workers confronting falling real wages, disintegrating public infrastructure, and widespread job insecurity.

The open support of Russia’s liberal opposition for closer relations with Washington, which was the architect of Yeltsin’s free-market policies and is viewed warily by many for its imperialist policies, also proved to be problematic.

In the lead-up to Sunday’s election, Putin made calculated appeals to anti-Americanism and justified fears over US meddling in Russia. He also tried to channel popular hostility towards the better-off sections of the urban population that have been most active in the recent anti-government protests into electoral support for his own campaign. He worked to distance himself from his own political party, United Russia, which is widely hated.

Above all, he falsified the anti-working class character of his own campaign and made a series of limited social promises—such as not raising the pension age—which he does not intend to keep.

Putin’s return to the presidency comes as the Russian ruling elite is beset by rising popular anger over social inequality and geopolitical tensions with the United States. Russia’s economy, wholly dependent on energy exports, is vulnerable to any renewed downturn in the world economy, particularly in Europe. In the Middle East, Moscow faces US threats to wage war against its allies, Syria and Iran.



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