

Putin wins Russian presidential elections amid growing international and domestic instability

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The Russian presidential elections on Sunday, March 18, ended, unsurprisingly, with a victory of the incumbent President Vladimir Putin in the first round of votes. With 82 percent of the vote counted, Putin was reelected for a fourth term with 75 percent of the vote. While Western media reports have indicated that irregularities at ballot offices occurred, there is little question that Putin won the election with a clear majority. He is thus set to be president of Russia for another 6 years.

Despite extensive efforts by the Kremlin and regional authorities to get people to vote—including bombarding them with emails and text messages—with around 60 percent, the voter turnout was the lowest for any presidential election since 1991 and fell significantly short of the 70 percent which was proclaimed as the official target.

The candidate of the Communist Party of Russia, the KPRF, Pavel Grudinin, received 12.26 percent of the vote and came in second. The leader of the far-right nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, received around 6 percent of the vote. Grudinin, a multimillionaire and owner of a major agricultural business, ran for the KPRF despite the fact he is not a member of the party. For many years, he was a member of the ruling Kremlin party United Russia and even a confidant of Vladimir Putin during his first presidential election campaign.

Two other nationalist candidates, the leader of the Stalinist party Communists of Russia, Maksim Suraikin, and the head of the Russian All-People's Union, Sergei Baburin both received less than 0.7 percent of the votes. From the camp of the liberal opposition, Ksenia Sobchak received the highest number of votes with 1.5 percent. The head of the Yabloko party, Grigory Yavlinsky, received 0.9 percent of the votes, a bit more than the more moderate candidate of the Party of Growth, Boris Titov, who received around 0.7 percent.

The results of the elections are, above all, a vote of no confidence in the forces of the pro-Western liberal opposition that, while enjoying significant support in influential layers of the ruling elites, including parts of the Kremlin leadership, have received statistically minimal support from voters. At the same time, the success of Vladimir Putin was largely the result of the fact that the vast majority of voters could see no progressive

alternative to him.

The Russian presidential elections took place amid unprecedented geopolitical tensions, and a prolonged decline of the living standards of the population. In the immediate run-up to the election, the British government spearheaded a campaign of escalating pressure on the Russian government over the alleged Skripal poisoning, while media throughout Europe and the US have been advocating for a more aggressive military stance against Russia in the Middle East and Europe.

This situation has markedly deepened the crisis of the ruling oligarchy, with some sections advocating a pro-Western regime change in Russia, while others try to find various ways to reach a negotiated settlement with US and European imperialism.

Alexei Navalny, who was the *de facto* main opponent of Vladimir Putin, had advocated a boycott of the elections after being denied the possibility to run as a candidate. Navalny is a direct instrument of world imperialism in its attempts to undermine Russia from within, conduct a “regime change” operation and turn the country into a colony of imperialism. His campaign was broadly and enthusiastically covered by the leading American and West European media, which depicted him as a “democratic” alternative to Putin’s authoritarianism. In reality, however, Navalny has close ties to Russian right-wing and fascist forces that resemble those that carried out the pro-Western coup in Ukraine in 2014.

Navalny no doubt enjoys the support of definite circles within the Russian elites who don’t see any other way to safeguard their wealth and privileges but to decisively capitulate before the pressure of the Western powers.

Ksenia Sobchak represents a somewhat softer variant of the same line. The socialite and daughter of the first post-Soviet mayor of St. Petersburg and mentor of Vladimir Putin, Anatoly Sobchak, shares the main orientation of Navalny and only differs from him in her rejection of a violent regime change. During the election campaign, Sobchak has expressed views which are incompatible with official Russian government propaganda while appearing on the country’s leading TV channels. She has declared that the Crimea was annexed by Russia in violation of international law, that the Western sanctions were justified and express the endeavor to strengthen democracy in Russia, etc.

The fact that she was allowed to do this within the framework of the election campaign testifies to the fact that she represents influential circles within the Kremlin leadership, which basically speak through her to the leaders of the Western world: “See, we are still the same as twenty years ago; we are for a free market, we are for collaboration with the West; if we are today forced to threaten you and snap our teeth, then it is only because we were pushed into a corner, because you don’t want to reckon with and respect our interests.” Sobchak plays the role of an intermediary in the attempts of the Kremlin to find an agreement with the Western leaders. At the same time, her efforts are aimed at keeping the wavering part of the comprador elements of the Russian bourgeoisie within the framework of a loyal relationship to the current government.

Putin builds his politics on a combination of Russian nationalism and military threats with appeals to the West to “become reasonable again” and return to a “partnership.” In his militaristic speech from March 1, which was unprecedented in terms of its aggressiveness, he presented a number of newly developed Russian nuclear weapons, the employment of which would turn the planet into an uninhabitable desert.

In domestic politics, Putin presents himself as a leader who stands above party and political disagreements, who has “brought Russia back from its knees,” has restrained the oligarchy and ensured the welfare of the citizens.

However, the reality looks quite different. Massive social inequality and an escalating war campaign by the imperialist powers point to the fact that Putin’s next presidential term will be marked by extreme and growing instability.

The nominal income of the overwhelming bulk of the population has, in dollar terms, shrunk over the past one and a half years by 1.5 times, as the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* recently noted. A comparable decline occurred in the spending of households on consumer goods: within the past five years they have declined from \$406 to \$260 a month per household member. According to sociologists, even the majority of those who have savings say that they would only suffice for a period of no more than three months.

Meanwhile, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the oligarchy is steadily rising. In 2017, the number of Russians who own more than \$5 million rose by 27 percent from the previous year to 38,000 people, according to the World Wealth Report published by the company Knight Frank. The super-rich (those owning \$50 million or more) saw their numbers rise by over 26 percent (2,600 people), while the number of Russians whose wealth comprised over \$500 million rose by 22 percent from 2016 to 2017 to 220 people. Knight Frank has calculated that together, the Russian multimillionaires own \$1.2 trillion, which is the equivalent of 73.5 percent of Russia’s GDP in 2017.

Russian workers hate and despise the deeply corrupt ruling elite. This is the main reason why Vladimir Putin ran as an “independent candidate,” and not as the leader of the United

Russia party. Indeed, it was a baffling fact of the pre-election campaign that the ruling party which completely dominates the representative organs on all levels—federal, regional and municipal—formally ran no candidate of its own. Its name was hardly even mentioned in the pre-election campaign.

Vladimir Petukhov, the head of the Center of Complex Social Research at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Science, spoke to the online newspaper *Gazeta.ru* about the “quite sharp shift from the decade-long trend of a social quest for stability to the quest for change,” which had occurred during the previous months. Between October 2016 and October 2017, the number of supporters of change rose from 39 percent to 52 percent. According to the historian and political scientist Valerii Solovei, “for the first time in the past 25-26 years in Russia the quest for change surpasses the quest for stability. And this among all socio-demographic groups.”

Neither the authoritarian-militarist nationalism of Putin, nor the course of the liberal opposition toward radical concessions to the neocolonial ambitions of the imperialist powers offers a way forward for the working class. The only alternative to the prospect of a new world war and a nuclear apocalypse lies in the perspective of *revolutionary socialist internationalism*, i.e., the overthrow of capitalism, the root of wars and social inequality internationally.

It is this perspective that motivated the Bolshevik party under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky in their seizure of power in October 1917. The Russian working class must again recognize this heritage as its own. This requires a conscious assimilation of the lessons from the betrayals that were carried out by Stalinism on the basis of the nationalist program of “socialism in one country” and a struggle to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Russia.



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