

The Russian presidential elections and the tasks of the working class

Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists
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In the Russian presidential elections of March 14-17, Vladimir Putin, who first became president in 2000, was, as expected, reelected as president for a fifth term.

The other candidates running were Vladislav Davankov of the New People Party, who ultimately supports the actions of Putin's regime and only differed from Putin slightly in that he advocates more openly and loudly for a deal with imperialism. The other candidates did not voice any major differences with Putin at all. Nikolai Kharitonov, the candidate of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), was an old laughing stock, whose candidacy made clear from the beginning that the CPRF, which has formed a critical pillar of the Putin regime for a quarter century, will welcome Putin's victory as their own. Leonid Slutsky, the candidate of the semi-fascist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), was and remains a fading shadow of the late Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who was himself only the chief fascistic buffoon of Putin's regime. The candidate of the NATO-backed opposition, Boris Nadezhdin, had been prevented from running.

The elections were overshadowed by the escalating NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Less than a month ago, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that NATO was discussing the direct deployment of troops to Ukraine. This step becomes all the more necessary for NATO after the disastrous collapse of the Ukrainian army's counter-offensive last year, in which it suffered huge losses, without making any gains. It is estimated that over 400,000 Ukrainians have died, and many more were injured in the first two years of this horrific fratricidal war. The number of dead and wounded among the Russians is now likely also well above 100,000.

In the days leading up to and during the election itself, NATO escalated its assault on Russian territory, killing at least five people and wounding dozens. Because of the ongoing attacks, since Tuesday schools and shopping malls in the border region Belgorod had to be closed. On Saturday, neo-Nazi forces aligned with the Kiev regime in Ukraine and NATO launched an incursion of Russian territory that involved the first deployment of tanks on Russian soil by a foreign country since the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in World War II. The *New York Times*, the principal mouthpiece of the US intelligence agencies and the Democratic Party, glorified these fascists as "rebellious Russians" for their "daring attacks."

The response to the outcome of the election in the pro-NATO media was similarly belligerent. Making clear that the imperialist powers will not tolerate the continued rule of Vladimir Putin and will double down on their efforts of regime change, Britain's *Financial Times* described "a fifth term for Putin" as "a threat to Europe, and the world."

Compared to the extraordinarily aggressive campaign by NATO, Putin's response to the threats and incursions by NATO-backed forces has been markedly muted. In his interview with the US far-right media personality Tucker Carlson in early February, which was widely publicized in Russia, Putin focused almost entirely on appealing to the

ruling elites of the NATO countries for "peaceful co-existence." In a record-long speech to the Federal Assembly on February 29, Putin reiterated his threat to use nuclear weapons but made only a brief reference to the threat by NATO to directly deploy its troops to Ukraine. He appealed, yet again, to the imperialist powers for negotiations.

Neither the threats by NATO nor those from Putin can be taken as empty words. The escalating and broadening imperialist war against Russia poses an existential threat to the workers of the former Soviet Union and the entire world. Nothing would be more dangerous than to underestimate the threat posed by imperialism or trust that one or another section of the ruling oligarchy can preempt a nuclear disaster.

The basis for understanding the present state of Russian politics and the war in Ukraine lies in the key events of the last century. The destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy—the culmination of Stalinism's betrayal of the achievements of the October Revolution of 1917—was the event that gave birth to 15 national capitalist states, including the Russian Federation.

The Russian oligarchy accompanied its birth pangs with slogans about a prosperous democratic Russia and pacifist illusions about imperialism. At the same time, it denounced what it called the "delusions of the Bolsheviks" about the nature of imperialism. But the catastrophic results of capitalist restoration fully confirmed all the warnings made by Leon Trotsky in his *Revolution Betrayed* (1936) and the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, in its intervention in the crisis of Stalinism in 1986-1991.

During the subsequent 33 years of Russian capitalism, the masses received not prosperity, democracy and peace but further oppression, skyrocketing levels of social inequality and authoritarian rule. Above all, the restoration of capitalism marked the beginning of an eruption of imperialist violence throughout the world and opened up the entire former Soviet Union to a growing onslaught by imperialism, culminating in the all but open war against Russia in Ukraine.

It is under these conditions that the Putin regime emerged as a Bonapartist regime, that defends the interests of the oligarchy. As Leon Trotsky explained in his *Revolution Betrayed*:

Bonapartism enters the scene in those moments of history when the sharp struggle of two camps raises the state power, so to speak, above the nation, and guarantees it, in appearance, a complete independence of classes—in reality, only the freedom necessary for a defense of the privileged. ... Bonapartism is one of the political weapons of the capitalist regime in its critical period.

Trotsky continued:

As history testifies, Bonapartism gets along admirably with a universal, and even a secret, ballot. The democratic ritual of Bonapartism is the *plebiscite*. From time to time, the question is presented to the citizens: *for* or *against* the leader? And the voter feels the barrel of a revolver between his shoulders.

In its historical origins and social function, the Putin regime arose and acts, first and foremost, as a defender of the privileges of the oligarchy. The restoration of capitalism led to an extraordinary immiseration of the broad masses of the population, while a tiny clique of oligarchs, recruited from the former bureaucracy, including the secret service, KGB, aspiring entrepreneurs and outright criminals, amassed fabulous fortunes. Putin constantly seeks to appeal to social discontent and present himself as a man of the masses, but under his regime social inequality has, in fact, grown enormously.

When Putin first took power in 2000, there was not a single Russian billionaire on the *Forbes* list. In 2023, there were 83. One year before the war in Ukraine began, in 2021, 500 oligarchs controlled more wealth—\$640 billion or 40 percent of all household wealth—than 99.8 percent of the population. It is for this social class that the Putin regime speaks in its ongoing and desperate attempts to find a negotiated settlement with the imperialist powers.

From the standpoint of the Russian oligarchy, the social and political function of Putin as a Bonapartist figure consists in that he mediates, first, between the working class and the oligarchy; second, between the different factions of the oligarchy; and, third, between the national and economic interests of the oligarchy and the interests of Western imperialism. Like any Bonapartist regime, the Putin regime is a deeply unstable regime of crisis. It will inevitably be blown asunder by the same class, political and international contradictions that it desperately seeks to mediate.

Historically and economically, the Putin regime and the oligarchy as a whole never had independence from imperialism. In destroying the Soviet Union, the former Stalinist bureaucrats worked hand in glove with the ruling class of the US, Germany and other imperialist powers.

And while the bourgeois media in the US and Western Europe continuously decry Putin as an “autocrat,” the truth is that his initial installment as president in 2000 was negotiated behind closed doors between Boris Yeltsin and the White House under Bill Clinton, whom Yeltsin informed that Putin “will win the election” well in advance. In his first term as president, Putin bent over backwards to appeal to the imperialist powers for collaboration and sought, by his own acknowledgement, admission of Russia to NATO. But none of the overtures by the oligarchs were and could be sufficient from the standpoint of imperialism. Driven by irresolvable international crises, the imperialist powers seek nothing less than the subjugation of the entire region to its full and direct control.

In his recent interview with Tucker Carlson, Putin de facto acknowledged that his entire foreign policy toward imperialism over the past 25 years has been a complete failure. At the same time, Putin only doubled down on this orientation and constantly repeated that he “doesn’t understand” why the West behaves the way it does. As we explained in our statement on the interview, the inability of the ex-KGB officer to “understand” the nature of imperialism is rooted in the historical origins and the entire social outlook of the oligarchy.

With its efforts to reach a deal with the imperialist powers, the Russian oligarchy mirrors the reactionary conception of “peaceful coexistence” by the Stalinist bureaucracy. In its betrayal of the revolutionary and internationalist foundations of the Soviet Union in the October Revolution, the bureaucracy strangled revolutionary movements everywhere, seeking to find a settlement with the imperialist powers.

The promotion of a “multipolar” world order by the Putin regime stems from this tradition. Fearing nothing more than the emergence of a revolutionary movement by the Russian and international working class, the Kremlin is appealing to nationalist regimes everywhere to form a counter-weight to the imperialist powers, only to increase their bargaining position at the negotiating table. This perspective is not only unviable and bankrupt but also entails more wars. As David North stated at the International May Day Rally of the WSWS and ICFI in 2023,

... the realization of a “multipolar” world, setting aside its incorrect theoretical foundations, requires its peaceful acceptance by today’s dominant imperialist power, the United States. This is not a realistic prospect. The United States will oppose with all the means at its disposal efforts to block its drive for “unipolar” hegemony. Thus, the utopian striving to replace a “unipolar” with a “multipolar” world leads, by its own twisted logic, to World War III and the destruction of the planet.

The Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists (YGBL) rejects the promotion of forces such as Boris Nadezhdin, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the late Alexei Navalny and his widow Yulia Navalnaya by the pro-NATO media and the pseudo-left as a “democratic” alternative to Putin who stand for “peace.” These figures speak not for the interests of workers and young people but sections of the Russian oligarchy, state apparatus and upper middle class who see in a carve-up of the region by imperialism the basis for their own further enrichment. This is the social and political constituency through which the imperialist powers seek to bring about the overthrow of the Putin regime and its replacement with a puppet regime of imperialism.

For the elections, these “oppositionists” called upon people to show up at the polls at noon on Sunday in a so-called “Midday against Putin” and then hand in an invalid ballot. This call was supported by the Pabloites of the Russian Socialist Movement and other pseudo-left forces. We reject such methods. Actions such as “Midday against Putin” can only serve to set people up for arrest and other forms of state repression. They do nothing to politically educate and mobilize workers while providing material for NATO’s war propaganda machine. This corresponds to the reactionary goals and social basis of the so-called “liberal opposition.”

Whatever their clamor about “peace” and “democracy,” the program and social forces that the opposition represents entail not “peace” but war: the violent carve-up of the entire region at the hands of imperialism and with the aid of fascist forces. Like her deceased husband, Navalny, who for many years maintained ties to fascist and separatist tendencies, Navalnaya is a stooge of the imperialist powers. She is openly supported by the Biden administration, which has spearheaded the war drive against Russia and is funding the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza by the Zionist regime.

Khodorkovsky, who also supported the “Midday against Putin” action, was the richest man of Russia and in control of large portions of its oil resources until he was imprisoned by Putin in 2003. Like the late Navalny, Khodorkovsky endorses regionalist and separatist movements that speak for the interests of local elites who hope to gain more direct control over Russia’s vast resources by setting up mini-statelets and establishing more direct ties with the imperialist powers. Other figures in the NATO-backed opposition, such as Ilya Ponomarev, have direct ties to the neo-Nazi paramilitary forces that have been involved in the incursions of Russian territory.

In endorsing the politics of these reactionary figures and their “Midday against Putin,” the Pabloites of the Russian Socialist Movement and other pseudo-left forces show themselves for what they are: hangers-on of imperialism. The fight by the working class against the Putin regime and

the war in Ukraine must proceed along an entirely different path: that of the class struggle.

The specter of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution haunts all sections of the oligarchy. They fear nothing more than that the war in Ukraine, similar to the First World War, will eventually lead to a revolutionary movement of the masses. This goes for Vladimir Putin no less than for his NATO-backed enemies in the oligarchy and state apparatus.

While Putin made only cursory references to the prospects of direct NATO intervention in Ukraine in his record-long address to the Federal Assembly, he spoke at great length on five national projects and dozens of measures that would be aimed at “supporting the population and businesses.” He promised that spending on national projects would total between 8 and 15 trillion rubles by 2030. This means an additional burden on the state budget from 1.4 to 2.5 trillion rubles a year. Putin gave no explanation as to how he was planning to fund these projects. Russia is already facing a budget deficit.

Let us also recall that Russia’s military spending is set to nearly triple compared to 2021 and for the first time will be larger than social spending. Whatever his demagogic popular rhetoric, to sustain such military spending, Putin’s regime will inevitably launch an attack on the already poor social conditions of working people. This will further compound significant social tensions that have been building up beneath the surface.

In the second half of 2023, 10.2 percent of Russians, according to official data, were living below the poverty line, i.e., their weekly income was no more than 14,000 rubles (about \$155). That is almost 15 million people. On top of that, Russians are now facing a new wave of price increases, and the total debt of Russians on consumer loans is growing. As of July 2023, it amounted to 32 trillion rubles (over \$353 billion). The share of households with debts has also started to grow and increased from 19.4 percent to 21.8 percent between July 2022 and July 2023. Meanwhile, by Putin’s own acknowledgement, corporate profits rose by 24 percent and the banking sector earned over 3 trillion rubles (\$33 billion) for 2023.

Social inequality in Russia has remained at the highest levels since 1995. In 2021, the richest 1 percent of Russian families had 47.6 percent of net household wealth. And the poorest 50 percent of families owned only 3.1 percent. This state of affairs carries the seeds for a huge social explosion.

The class struggle in Russia does not develop in a vacuum. Internationally, we have seen the beginning of a resurgence of the class struggle, most notably in imperialist centers like the US, Germany, France and Britain, as well as throughout Africa, Latin America and Asia. The emergence of a movement in the working class above all in the imperialist countries and especially in the United States will have a powerful impact on the emergence of a movement by the working class in Russia and Ukraine.

In this context, workers must be warned of the ever more overt appeals by Putin to the far right, in Russia itself and internationally. Putin announced his candidacy on December 8 in response to a “request” from the chairman of the People’s Council of the Donetsk People’s Republic, Artyom Zhoga, a well-known far-right figure. Zhoga is also the commander of the Sparta Battalion, which has a Russian imperial flag and lightning bolts resembling the SS symbol on its insignia.

The Kremlin is also increasingly supporting the integration of the Orthodox Russian Church, which has historically emerged as a bulwark of far-right, counter-revolutionary and antisemitic tendencies in Russia, into secular institutions in order to “increase the spirituality of the people.” Moreover, Putin has publicly supported the anti-abortion and anti-migrant movement. The promotion of extreme nationalism and the build-up of far-right forces are fundamentally directed against the working class. The aim is to both divide and confuse workers, while encouraging and building up

the far-right forces that the oligarchy will rely on to defend its interests against any movement developing in the working class.

The fifth term of Vladimir Putin will be characterized by an expanding war and an ever greater social and political crisis for which his regime does not and cannot have an answer. The dead end of his regime is the dead end of the entire ruling class and social system that arose out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union.

Whatever the bankrupt calculations on the part of Putin for a settlement with imperialism that underlay the invasion of Ukraine, the imperialist war against Russia is ultimately the outcome of the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

Over two years into the war, anxiety is no doubt growing about its continuation and escalation among workers in Russia, Ukraine and beyond. The horrific experiences of the Second World War and fascism, which resulted in at least 27 million people dead in the Soviet Union, have not been forgotten. But the fundamental problem is that workers and young people do not know how to find a way out.

We insist: The war in Ukraine must be stopped but not through the imperialist carve-up of the region and a NATO-backed regime change in Moscow. Nor can the working class rely on the Putin regime’s desperate attempts to find a negotiated agreement with imperialism through a redrawing of national borders and a combination of nuclear threats and the begging for “security guarantees.” The task of the working class is not the reshuffling of national borders or to appeal to this or another faction of the imperialist powers and the oligarchy but to fight to end the capitalist nation-state system as a whole. The only way to stop this war and preempt a nuclear disaster is through the development of a socialist anti-war movement in the Russian, Ukrainian and international working class.

History, and especially the history of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, has shown that the same contradictions that lead to war also lead to revolution. But such a movement of the working class and young people against war and capitalism must be prepared through the building of a vanguard party in the working class that can fight, within such a movement, for a revolutionary perspective and Marxism.

The revolutionary traditions of Bolshevism and Marxist internationalism, which Stalinism sought to destroy in a decades-long war on Marxism and its cadre in the Soviet and international working class, must be rebuilt. This requires a fight for Trotskyism, based on the lessons of its century-long struggle against Stalinism and all forms of petty-bourgeois nationalism and opportunism. The Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists in Russia and Ukraine is advancing this fight through the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the former Soviet Union. We call upon workers and youth who are determined to fight against the emerging global war to join this struggle.



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