Russia holds first war-time parliamentary elections

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In the first parliamentary elections held in Russia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the ruling United Russia party, which is associated with President Vladimir Putin, won a clear majority with 355 seats. The Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation came in second with 40 seats. The far-right nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia received 25 seats, and the New People Party 20 seats. All parties that were allowed to participate in the elections have expressed their support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The elections were entirely dominated by the war. Several candidates running for United Russia were military veterans. Vladimir Putin, although not formally a member of United Russia, publicly threw his support behind the party—something he had previously avoided. Shortly before the elections, he also called upon the population to turn out and vote, stating, "This will become our joint response to those who want to weaken Russia, contain its development, deprive us of sovereignty and the right to determine our fate ourselves. Participation in the elections—this is your joint contribution to the victory of Russia."

The elections were held amidst Ukraine's biggest drone attack on Russian territory, involving some 1,600 drones. At least two people died in the Moscow region as a result of the drone strikes. According to Russian officials, many of the drones targeted electoral infrastructure.

In recent months, Ukraine has intensified drone strikes on Russian territory, killing hundreds of civilians and shutting down major oil refineries and logistics hubs. The strikes have significantly aggravated the socio-economic crisis in the country. Russia, one of the world's largest oil exporters, now has to import fuel to address fuel shortages. Inflation for basic grocery items has increased substantially.

Voter turnout was 59 percent. While still low, it was the second-highest voter participation in Russia since the 1991 destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Among those eligible to vote were residents of the Donbass in areas occupied by Russia since 2022.

In an indication of immense political tensions within the ruling class, in the months preceding the election, the Kremlin made sure to eliminate parties and candidates that openly challenged the war and other policies of the government. The pro-NATO opposition party Yabloko was banned from participating in the elections and its deputy head, Lev Shlosberg, was sentenced to 11 years and 1 month in prison. Several members of the KPRF, too, were barred from participating through various administrative maneuvers as well as last-minute criminal charges brought against them. While the majority of the KPRF and its leadership back the Putin regime and its war in Ukraine, there has been a wing in the party advocating a rapprochement with the NATO-backed opposition around the late Alexei Navalny. Since the banning of Yabloko, sections of the KPRF have also tried to appeal more directly to the former's electorate.

During the elections, the KPRF reported multiple violations of electoral regulations. Its observers were barred from doing their work in 21 regions. Other parties, including Just Russia, also reported violations.

But the high voter turnout and election results cannot be reduced to the anti-democratic measures of the Kremlin, no matter how reactionary they are. The elections expressed, in a highly distorted way, the immense anxiety and concern within the working class and broader population about what is correctly perceived as an escalating attack by the imperialist powers. The memories of the Second World War, when Nazi Germany, with the help of nationalist collaborators from across Eastern Europe, invaded the Soviet Union, are still very vivid among the population. An estimated 27 million Soviet citizens were killed during the war, including 2 million Soviet Jews and significant portions of the civilian

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population in major cities such as Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Large parts of the western regions of the Soviet Union lay in ruins. There is barely a family in Russia or any other country of the former Soviet Union that did not lose one or, more often, multiple family members to the imperialist attack. The fact that the imperialist powers, and especially Germany, are now again sending tanks against Russia, while enabling Ukraine to rain missiles and drones on Russian cities, has only reinforced those memories, provoking immense anger and fear.

However, the vote also reflects dangerous illusions that the Putin regime, with its combination of chauvinism, militarism and appeals for a negotiated settlement with imperialism, can mitigate this existential danger and prevent a further broadening of the war.

In a speech before the Military-Industrial Commission of the Russian Federation on September 18, the first day of the election, Putin restated this basic policy. He noted that "some European leaders openly speak about preparing for war against Russia" but also stressed, "We are ready to cooperate and to restore relations with our European neighbors." Pointing to NATO's recent military exercises in the Baltics, he went on to outline Russia's military-industrial priorities in light of "the developing world situation," a murky reference to the broadening global conflict. He stated: "Strengthening the nuclear triad remains an absolute priority; it continues to guarantee our country's sovereignty and plays a pivotal role in maintaining the global balance of power." Putin also highlighted the need for the strengthening of Russia's air defenses and military drone program, as well as its military capabilities in space.

Neither the Putin regime's attempts to appease the imperialist powers and "restore" relations, nor the preparations for a much broader military conflict, are capable of containing the existential threat posed to the working class by the emerging imperialist world war. It is a policy that is rooted in the class interests of an oligarchy that arose out of the Stalinist counterrevolution against the 1917 October Revolution, the first socialist revolution that successfully overthrew the capitalist class and made large portions of the globe inaccessible to direct imperialist exploitation for over seven decades.

In destroying the Soviet Union, the Stalinist bureaucracy—out of which the former KGB agent Putin and many oligarchs directly emerged—worked closely with the same imperialist "partners" that have now launched a renewed imperialist assault on Russia in an attempt to obtain full and direct control of its vast resources. At the time, the Soviet bureaucracy declared that the concept of "imperialism," developed by Marxists, most notably Lenin in the early 20th century, was a "myth." With the invasion of Ukraine, which had long been provoked by NATO and its proxy regime in Kiev, the oligarchy has been seeking to return to the "partnership" with the imperialist powers that underlay a protracted period in which the oligarchy could enrich itself, while the working class was plunged into destitution.

But the response of the imperialist powers has not been to negotiate, but to escalate and broaden the conflict. From their standpoint, the invasion of Ukraine, with the immense damage it caused to the political consciousness of the working class, was a welcome opportunity to realize long-held domestic and foreign policy goals. Even as the Ukraine war has turned out to be a bloody debacle, the European imperialist powers in particular have responded by deepening their offensive. This cannot be explained by poor policy decisions. Underlying the renewed push by world imperialism to seize control of the resources of the former Soviet Union is the crisis of the world capitalist system, which has been dramatically accelerated by the development of technologies such as artificial intelligence that heavily rely on critical minerals and energy resources—raw materials that Russia has in large quantities.

No appeals to reason and no military pressure will halt this unfolding imperialist redivision of the world. The only way for the working class to intervene in this dangerous development from the standpoint of its own interests is through the methods of class struggle and a revival of its internationalist Marxist traditions, which the Stalinist bureaucracy and its heirs in the oligarchy have sought to destroy. This means fighting to build the Trotskyist movement in the former Soviet Union and to unite the working class in Russia, Ukraine and beyond in opposition to the ruling class in all countries and the capitalist system as a whole.

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