

## The Russian Presidential Election: What Next?

By Stephen White, Glasgow

### Abstract

Vladimir Putin's election was scarcely a surprise. But the political context had changed, and this meant a rather different kind of exercise, with a national system of electronic surveillance and unprecedented numbers of observers. The implications of the election will take some time to emerge: further changes to the electoral system are currently being considered by the Duma, and there are prospects of more far-reaching constitutional changes that would turn Russia into a more 'parliamentary' system. Putin himself appears to have a more limited agenda, and one that may not be sufficient to satisfy a more disaffected society.

The result, in itself, was hardly a surprise. Nor even that it was a victory for Putin on the first round. His rating had been improving since December, and the Levada Centre, which is not usually regarded as Kremlin-friendly, had predicted 66 per cent. Nor was there much of a surprise in the distribution of the result around the country. Chechnya, once again, was the leader, with an impressive 99.8 per cent, followed by Dagestan and Ingushetia, with 93 and 92 per cent respectively. Moscow, at the other extreme, was a disappointment (46 per cent), although this time there was a better showing in the northern capital, St Petersburg, with 59 per cent (it is, of course, Putin's home town). And overall, turnout was slightly higher (see pp. 22–24 for the election results of all the regions).

But the context had changed since December, and particularly since the moment that a popular movement began to develop that set out as its main objective the cancellation of elections that had been widely regarded as fraudulent. The outcome, in fact, was close to the predictions of the main opinion poll organisations. But public opinion, on the evidence of a survey that was commissioned by the author and associates from Russian Research in January (n=1600), found that not much more than half thought the results that had been declared were an honest reflection of the votes that had been cast, and about a third took the opposite view.

This time, the Kremlin promised, it would be different. And in many respects it was. One of the main differences was the introduction of a system of web cameras in almost all of the 93,000 polling stations, recording the entire proceedings from opening time at 8 a.m. to closing time at 8 p.m. It was an expensive innovation (an estimated \$300 million), but Putin had promised it when he conducted his national 'direct line' in late December, and it appears to have been a success even though some polling stations were left outside the system (a few had no electricity supply, and there were others that lost their connection). It did, at least, catch some obvious examples of ballot stuffing (the results were immediately invalidated), as well as a number of elec-

tion officials who had been having a quiet sleep (not to mention two voters who took the opportunity to engage in some physical intimacy).

Another difference was the massive presence of election observers. Locally, there were some entirely new citizen initiatives, including 'For Honest Elections' and 'The League of Voters', as well as more familiar ones; altogether, about a million observers of this kind were mobilised, more than twice as many as had taken part in December. And there were more international monitors: not only representatives from the OSCE and the Council of Europe, but an even larger delegation from the Commonwealth of Independent States and a group of fifty 'experts' from Europe and the United States, selected by the Central Electoral Commission itself in order to provide a view that was more likely to be supportive of the Kremlin.

All the same, there was a very mixed reaction to the provisional results when they began to emerge. GOLOS (Vote), which is locally based but dependent on outside funding, argued in their initial assessment that the degree of falsification had been about 15 per cent—enough to have deprived Putin of a first-round victory. The OSCE mission was more cautious, concluding that there had been some improvements since December but that the entire exercise lacked genuine competition and an impartial arbiter. Businessman Mikhail Prokhorov, who came third and second in the two capitals, refused to acknowledge the results until he had been able to examine them more closely. Communist leader Genadii Zyuganov went further, pronouncing the results 'illegitimate' and refusing to take part in a post-election round table with the other candidates.

Foreign governments were just as cautious, and particularly in their willingness to 'congratulate' the new President-elect. There were friendly greetings from the presidents of China, Iran, Syria and Venezuela, and from Belarus and most of the other post-Soviet republics. Elsewhere in Europe, Angela Merkel was the first Western leader to send her greetings, and President Sarkozy went as far as 'congratulations'. The European Union

as a whole was less enthusiastic, and the United States came up with a response that 'congratulated the Russian people on the completion of the presidential elections' without mentioning Putin himself.

The new President will be inaugurated in May; what is less clear is what kind of presidency it will be, and in particular, what kind of relationship will be established between a newly elected leadership and a newly assertive society. There was no indication at any time that the Kremlin might be willing to cancel the Duma election and repeat it on a different basis. But initial reactions to the December result suggested that there could be far-reaching changes in the electoral system of a kind that would make it more accessible and meaningful to ordinary citizens. The 'against all' option, for a start, might be restored (it would of course allow voters to express their dissatisfaction with the Kremlin authorities without having to opt for an oppositional party). And the single-member constituencies might be restored, so that voters could choose a particular person who would thereafter be 'their deputy' instead of selecting among a centrally-determined set of party lists.

It was reforms of this kind that were the subject of the initiatives that Medvedev introduced in late December and which are currently acquiring legislative form. As formulated, there will be no return to the previous electoral system, in which half the seats were filled by constituency-based competitions between individual candidates. There will, however, be a party-list competition on a constituency basis, organised so that each of the 83 republics and regions can be assured of some form of representation. It will be easier to form and register a political party—perhaps only 500 members will be necessary, certainly far fewer than the 40,000 that is presently required. And there will a return to the direct election of governors, although there will also be a presidential 'filter' that will allow the most unwelcome candidates to be excluded before they reach the ballot paper.

Some of the most interesting developments took place in the period immediately following polling day. In a decision that became known on 5 March, Medvedev indicated that he had invited the Procurator General to review a series of judicial decisions, one of them the sentences that had been passed on former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Perhaps more significant in the longer term, it was also announced that a law would be prepared on the convening of a constitutional convention. A mechanism of this kind is necessary if chapters 1, 2 or 9 of the constitution are to be amended, but it has not yet been provided for in legislation. There have already been some suggestions from what Russians call the political class that there should not only be specific changes, such as the reintroduction of a vice-presi-

dency, but also a full-scale revision or even replacement of the document that was approved by a popular vote in 1993. At least in some versions (for instance, the one preferred by Igor Yurgens of the Institute for Contemporary Development, widely seen as a Medvedev think-tank), changes of this kind might extend as far as to convert Russia from a presidential to a parliamentary republic.

An early indication will be the composition of the new government, and especially the choice of prime minister. Putin gave something less than an unconditional guarantee to Medvedev in September when he announced that he would accept a nomination to the presidency; all the same, this has to be seen as the most likely option. Other names have been suggested, including Aleksei Kudrin, the former finance minister and a choice that would be popular in Western capitals. Putin has already promised to make far-reaching changes in ministerial ranks, and that at least half the present cabinet will be replaced. This would of course be an opportunity to bring at least a few oppositionists into the government; Zyuganov has suggested some names already, including economist and former presidential candidate Sergei Glaz'ev.

This would in effect be a 'liberalising' scenario: one that would broaden the political debate, restore a dialogue between regime and society, and allow the discussion to continue without the need for tens of thousands to assemble every few weeks on the public squares of major cities. At the same time it is not the trajectory that Putin himself appears to have chosen, or one he will be willing to contemplate. He has repeatedly insisted that the opposition might have legitimate concerns, but that its main support comes from abroad, and that those who take a different view are in effect the agents of a foreign power. Speaking to his supporters at a rally in central Moscow after the result had been declared, Putin again insisted that any attempt to subvert the Russian political process from abroad 'would not succeed'. There was nothing about dialogue, or opening up the political system to a wider range of opinion, or finding a way forward that would rebuild the kind of national consensus that appears to have evaporated over recent months.

We have some indication of the way forward that the newly re-elected President is likely to choose in the series of extended articles he published in January and February in a number of central newspapers. The underlying thesis was the same as it has always been: that Russia can and should find some kind of optimal path between a return to the Soviet past and the market fundamentalism of the 1990s. There was a particularly heavy emphasis (for instance in the article that appeared in *Izvestiya* on 16 January) on stability and the growth of a middle class. Already, Putin suggested, between 20 and 30 per cent of the society could be placed in this category;

it would account for a majority within the foreseeable future at the same time as more or less the entire adult population become university or college graduates.

There was another contribution on 'democracy and the quality of the state' in the business paper *Kommerstant* on 6 February. There could be no copying of Western forms of democracy; they had hindered economic reform and allowed power to slip into the hands of 'local and central oligarchic elites', leading to a 'covert struggle of clans and a proliferation of semifeudal rent-seeking'. How could they avoid this 'combination of anarchy and oligarchy' in the future? One way, certainly, was to involve ordinary people in state management on a continuing basis, such as by an 'interactive interface' in government web portals. There should also be a greater role for 'self-regulating organisations', in effect civil society. The internet could be used to provide for the public dis-

cussion of draft legislation, or what experts called 'cloud-sourcing'. And citizens should be able to put forward their own proposals, as in the United Kingdom, where a petition signed by more than 100,000 would normally ensure its discussion within the legislature.

If there is a gap in this agenda of change, it is precisely politics: not respectful petitions from ordinary citizens (who will have to register with the authorities if they wish to make use of the new mechanism), or electronic 'consultations', but genuine alternatives advanced by independent parties at competitive elections in a process that rests ultimately on the rule of law. As we head into a new and more turbulent period in Russia's post-communist politics, it is far from clear that Putin will be able to understand the issues in such terms or that the powerful interests he represents will in any case allow him to do so.

#### *About the Author*

Stephen White is James Bryce Professor at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. His recent publications include *Understanding Russian Politics* (Cambridge, 2011) and *Russia's Authoritarian Elections* (with others, Routledge, 2012).

#### *Further Reading:*

- Stephen White, *Understanding Russian Politics* (Cambridge, 2011)
- Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (Tauris, 2011)

## ANALYSIS

### Can Putinism Evolve?

By Robert W. Orttung, Zurich

#### **Abstract**

As Vladimir Putin begins what is effectively his fourth term as Russia's dominant leader, having set the country's course for the last 12 years, the central question in defining Russia's future is whether he can define and implement a set of reforms to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive global market place and satisfy the yearnings of a more vocal and assertive civil society in Russia's main cities. Answering this question requires taking into account the nature of the system Putin has created, his style of political leadership, the effectiveness of key institutions of accountability—particularly the media—and the strength of Russia's energy-based economy.

#### **Corruption as a System-Defining Feature**

Corruption defines the core of Russia's political system. Most visibly, many of the people closest to Vladimir Putin during his rise to power have become fabulously wealthy thanks to their access to state-controlled wealth. These people need Putin to remain in office in order to provide a guarantee for their property rights since Russia's courts clearly would not be able to ensure

that today's holdings will not be appropriated by other groups once Putin is no longer in office. As a result, Putin is effectively trapped into remaining Russia's leader.

Beyond the question of a potential redistribution of property is one of personal security. If Putin were to leave office, he would inevitably face calls that he and his closest allies be put on trial for the extensive theft of state property. One viral video on the Russian Inter-