

## Потёмкиность: The Illusion of Russian Elections and Russian Power



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**T**here is virtually no chance that Russian President Vladimir Putin will lose the 18 March 2018 Presidential election to serve an unprecedented fourth time. He has all but hand-picked his opponents and prevented Alexei Navalny from running. He controls the media, guaranteeing himself universally positive coverage. He will supply the polling stations with swarms of his supporters, meaning that ballot boxes can be stuffed as easily as some were six years ago, and he oversees those who count the ballots, leading Gary Kasparov to ponder why Putin didn't produce the final vote tallies when he announced his candidacy on 6 December 2017. Finally, should something untoward accidentally happen in spite of all this control, Putin can count on the courts to rule in his favor.

Nevertheless, Putin is concerned about the election itself, as he needs it to establish the façade of legitimacy both at home and abroad. A low turnout will show domestic and international audiences that the Russian electorate is resigned to, rather than excited about a continued Putin Presidency. This could cause yet another chip in his carefully constructed image that is designed to project power and relevancy. The 2012 Presidential election saw 65.25% participation, down 4.45% from the previous election. Even more disconcerting for the Putin regime, the Levada Center tracked plummeting poll numbers throughout 2016 and into 2017 for both Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and the Russian government, both of which tracked well under 50%, and the “current direction of Russia,” which rated barely over 50%. While the Levada

Center is no longer allowed to conduct polls because of these results, this year-old information makes even the most casual observer wonder just how excited the Russian electorate can be with this election or the resulting government. Although Putin's personal numbers remain high, there is nevertheless a strong element of Putin fatigue, especially among the young, who are more cynical about politics generally and about Putin specifically.

This is why Putin has chosen to have a "reality TV"-style election rather than a "real" election. Presidential debates have become shouting matches, with the occasional glass of water thrown by one candidate at another. Perennial candidate and leader of the LDPR Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, long thought to be funded by the Kremlin to make them look rational by comparison, is once again on the ballot. Ksenia Sobchak, TV hostess, pop star, and daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, Putin's first political mentor, is allowed to run, provided that she is "responsible" – Putin's words – for her campaign; there is clearly a hope that she will attract more young people to the polls through her celebrity status. And, while the Communist Party, itself in the midst of a generational shift in leadership, is also on the ballot, it faces daily attacks from the press not because of its communist ideas, which would be a legitimate line of attack, but because their candidate owns foreign property and has foreign bank accounts. This too would be a legitimate line of attack, if only Putin and his people didn't have both in excess.

This election campaign, carefully polished and prepared for the public, is designed to show not only the inevitability of the Putin candidacy, but also to demonstrate that everyone else is feeble by comparison. In fact, everything about Putin since his 2012 return to the Presidency has been about trying to convince the world that Russia is strong, powerful, and relevant and has something positive to offer its neighbors and the wider world – and that all of this is completely dependent upon a forever-Putin Presidency.

On the surface Russia seems strong, and Putin, who has made it his trademark to tie his personal strength to a Russian resurgence, has seemed strong as well. Russia has meddled in US elections and continues to do so in Europe. It has mucked up Syria to the point that Bashar al Assad, a rare Kremlin ally, will likely remain in power. It has complicated China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia through the existence of the Eurasian Economic Union, and it continues to foster instability in and threaten NATO member states. It has made unproven claims as to new, unassailable weaponry that can bring the world to its knees. And, if the growing evidence is true, it has just tried to assassinate a pardoned spy, freed and living in England. While this is not the first time that Russia has gone after such individuals on foreign soil, as it is a long-standing tradition to go after "traitors" and "criminals," from Leon Trotsky through Alexander Litvinenko, and now, perhaps, including Nikolai Glushkov. It is a clear

violation of the rules of espionage to attempt to murder someone who was freely pardoned and traded to the other side.

As with an election that is only a façade, the image here too does not match up to the reality: Russia is very much a weak state; Russian power is largely an illusion, and, where it does exist, it is only the power to destroy. As former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson noted on 12 March 2018, just one day before being fired: “From Ukraine to Syria – and now the UK – Russia continues to be an irresponsible force of instability in the world, acting with open disregard for the sovereignty of other states and the life of their citizens.”

From the country that gave the world the “Potemkin village” comes the modern version with increasing layers of Потёмкиность. Those with contacts in Russian Ministries have been assured that, while everything seems shiny on the surface, just below and all the way down, everything is rotting away. As former CIA Director and now Secretary-of-State designate Mike Pompeo noted on 11 March 2018, “Vladimir Putin says a lot of things that are without foundation.” Putin’s state, likewise, is without a solid foundation.

Day-by-day, Russia’s meddling in Western democracy is being exposed, most recently with Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller’s indictment of 12 Russian citizens, all working for the Internet Research Agency, and Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian oligarch and “Putin’s Chef,” who is alleged to have financed and directed this agency. As the investigation continues, the prosecutorial net is closing in on Putin himself. Meanwhile, although an increasing number of European nations are electing right-of-center governments, this has not resulted in increased Russian influence in Europe, as the sanctions regime has held and will likely be increased. Putin’s new weapons presentation was universally derided in the West, with Pompeo stating in the same 11 March 2018 interview that “there was literally nothing that [Putin] said in that speech that surprised the intelligence community.” Several of the weapons had been previously announced, and some of the accompanying videos were apparently taken from years-old internet sites. *The Economist* has called several of the systems “practically dubious.”

While these revelations are largely embarrassments for Putin, there are two more serious issues that demonstrate Putin’s potential weakness on a larger scale.

In Syria, while Russia pretends to play the role of humanitarian with phony pauses in the fighting, it loses mercenary troops – most recently upwards of 200, allegedly funded by Prigozhin through the Wagner Group – with the Russian media unable to create a plausible narrative as to what is happening on the ground in Syria and Putin unable to raise a fuss. To do

so would be to admit that the mercenaries are there; to do so also might be to admit that the entire situation is no longer under his control. All the while, the quagmire sinks deeper and deeper for Russian involvement, weakening Russia abroad.

In addition, the recent attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal and his daughter shows potential weakness at home. As UK Prime Minister Theresa May noted before Parliament on 12 March 2018, “Either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country, or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.” There is a third possibility: there is already a power struggle brewing behind the scenes among those who wish to replace Putin in six years, if not sooner. They, members of the state security forces, thus members of the Russian government, have access to high-grade weapons, including the nerve agent Novichok, and they no longer feel a need to answer to Putin before using it. This would be the ultimate sign of a weakened Putin and a potential unravelling of the Russian state.

A majority of these situations would likely be enough to make a Western leader fall, but Putin will easily win re-election, as he would almost certainly win if the election were truly free, open, and fair. He is still able to play upon the resentment of a population that feels marginalized, shunted aside, and no longer taken seriously by the world. He is able to distract with talk of enemies at home and abroad: the Americans and the British, almost always, and the Chinese, when necessary, from abroad, and non-Russian Russians, such as “Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews,” to use Putin’s own words, at home. And he has so fully marginalized his political opponents, serious and otherwise, that there is no one able to step in and take his place, at least not yet.

Thus, for the present, an increasingly weak Russia is stuck with an increasingly weak Putin, both under the delusion of being powerful. Russia will have to continue to limp along as long as Putin remains in office, just as it has for so many years and likely will do for many years to come.

In response, there is little that the West can do, except to continue to tighten sanctions against the Russian state and find ways to embarrass the Russian President, all in the name of shining a bright light on the foundation that is rotting away under both.

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