



And the winner is... Vladimir Putin (for now)

by Ian Bond, 21 March 2024

Putin's 'election victory' does not mean that he will remain in power forever. Western leaders should plan for continued confrontation, but (unlike Putin) they should not fear change in Russia.

In democratic states, elections give the people the chance to choose their leaders, and the results are sometimes surprising. In Vladimir Putin's Russia, the events described as 'elections' involve no real choice and definitely no surprises. The purpose of the ritual that took place from March 15th-17th was to enable Putin to show the Russian people and the rest of the world that he is Russia's legitimate ruler and that there can be no alternative to him. The West should not accept either proposition.

This is the fifth time that Putin has been 'elected' as president of Russia. In 2000, in relatively free and fair elections, he received 53.4 per cent of the vote on a 68.6 per cent turnout. In his latest 'landslide' (as Reuters [described](#) it), he allegedly received 87 per cent of the vote on a turnout of around 77 per cent – figures that seem implausibly high. As a guide to what the Russian people really feel, however, the published numbers matter no more than those in Soviet elections used to.

What the official figures show is what Putin's subordinates thought they had to deliver to prove their loyalty and reliability. With three days of in-person voting plus (for the first time) online voting, systematic voter [intimidation](#), no independent domestic or international election observers at polling stations and no means of verifying or disproving the published results, it would be impossible to work out how many people really voted for Putin. It would be even harder to say how many did so freely, rather than because they feared the consequences of voting for the 'wrong' candidate.

There were certainly some issues of concern for the regime. Before the poll, an anti-war candidate, Boris Nadezhdin, proved unexpectedly popular, with long lines of people queuing up to sign his nomination papers. The Central Electoral Commission took fright and disqualified him from standing on the basis that too many of the signatures were invalid. Once voting opened, a few people ([described](#) as "scum" by the chair of the Central Electoral Commission, Ella Pamfilova) took direct action against the poll, despite the risk of long prison sentences, pouring dye or paint into ballot boxes, or setting fire to ballot

papers. A much larger number [appear](#) to have heeded the call for a ‘noon against Putin’ – turning up to vote against Putin or spoil their ballot papers exactly at noon on the last day of polling. This small sign of defiance was promoted by the leading opposition figure Yuliya Navalnaya and endorsed by her late husband Aleksey Navalny before his death. To join in such a protest, even after the authorities had warned that participants faced five years in prison, was a courageous act. Other Russians left [messages](#) at Navalny’s grave calling him “the candidate we wanted”.

Whether or not Putin was worried by this evidence that some in Russia still opposed the status quo, he was in a bullish mood when he strode on stage at his campaign headquarters on the evening of March 17th to claim victory. He [said](#) that his main tasks as president would be “strengthening defence capacity and the military”. He [boasted](#) of the progress being made by Russian forces in Ukraine, claiming “The initiative belongs entirely to the Russian armed forces. In some areas, our guys are just mowing them – the enemy – down.” In Putin’s [address](#) to the Federal Assembly on February 29th – Russia’s equivalent of the US president’s annual ‘State of the Union’ address – he reiterated his goals in Ukraine, including the eradication of ‘Nazism’ – code for the elimination of a sovereign Ukrainian government in Kyiv. A few days later, former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, now the deputy chair of the Russian Security Council, [claimed](#) that “Ukraine is definitely Russia”.

The West can look forward to six more years of confrontational rhetoric from Putin and those around him – and perhaps even longer, since Putin has the right to run for a further six-year term in 2030. In 2014, Putin’s then deputy chief of staff, now chair of the lower house of the Russian parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, [said](#) that without Putin there was no Russia. The Russia analysts Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman recently [described](#) one of Putin’s goals as “to deprive most Russians of the ability to imagine a future without him”. But Putin has also persuaded many foreign leaders that his grip on power will last forever.

At a time when Ukraine is struggling on the battlefield and the West is unable to match Russia’s production of weapons and ammunition, the prospect of an eternity of Putin may tempt some in the West to start thinking about negotiations with Putin, or [at least](#) ‘talks about talks’. That would be a mistake: Putin will view any overture as a sign of Western weakness, and he already believes, as he said in an [interview](#) on March 13th, that “for us to hold negotiations [with Ukraine] now just because they are running out of ammunition would be ridiculous”. Western leaders should instead focus on signs in Russia that Putin’s regime has vulnerabilities, and where possible exploit them, to turn the pressure back on him.

First, Yevgeny Prigozhin’s short-lived mutiny in June 2023 showed that Putin could not count on those around him to defend him unless they were sure that he was going to win. Along Prigozhin’s route from the south of Russia towards Moscow, governors personally appointed by Putin did little or nothing to stop the mutineers. Growing repression in Russia shows Putin’s paranoia, but perhaps he has good cause to be paranoid, both about his opponents – as Alexei Navalny said in 2020, “If they decide to kill me, it means that we are incredibly strong” – and his cronies.

The mutiny’s aftermath also showed that Putin valued loyalty above competence. Minister of Defence Sergey Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov, who had presided over the chaotic early months of the invasion and later the loss of a significant part of the Black Sea Fleet, demonstrated their loyalty, and still remain in their jobs. Prigozhin, by contrast, could point to a record of success for his ‘Wagner’ mercenary group, both in Africa and in Ukraine, but signed his own death warrant when he mutinied.

Second, to keep the population passive, Putin still needs to be able to provide a reasonable degree of prosperity; yet the Russian economy is more fragile than it sometimes appears. GDP growth (forecast at 2.6 per cent this year according to the [IMF](#), but only 1.3 per cent by the [World Bank](#)) is inflated by the scale of military spending, which is expected to exceed 6 per cent of GDP and almost 30 per cent of the federal budget this year. For the time being, Putin may be able to persuade Russians to forego butter to pay for more guns, but he has also promised vast investments in Russia's infrastructure and in its people and their skills. As long as resources are diverted towards the war effort, these promises will go unfulfilled. Sooner or later Putin will have to deal with the trade-off between Russia's economic needs and his ability to maintain a high-intensity war in Ukraine.

Sanctions may not have had the rapid effects that many hoped for, but they are gradually squeezing the Russian economy. Russian exports fell 28 per cent by volume in 2023. The ruble is under pressure, forcing the central bank to maintain its interest rate at 16 per cent and depressing investment. EU officials expect an economic crunch in a year to 18 months. Sanctions could be tightened further, for example by cracking down on all the ways in which Russia has sought to evade the price cap on the oil it exports. The Russian economy is also heavily reliant on imports, including of the equipment and technical services required to maintain the oil and gas production on which budget revenues depend; the West could strengthen sanctions on such goods and services.

The Russian economy is also threatened by labour shortages. Russian statistics on military recruitment are [suspect](#): the Ministry of Defence has a financial incentive to exaggerate the number of personnel it has on its books. Still, 300,000 people were reportedly mobilised from September 2022 onwards, and some hundreds of thousands signed contracts as volunteers in 2023. The UK Ministry of Defence [estimates](#) that Russia has lost 356,000 killed or wounded in the first two years of the war. Another 800,000 – 900,000 people [left the country](#) because they opposed the war, did not want to be mobilised or wanted to avoid the economic effects of sanctions. Large numbers of workers have also been diverted into the defence industrial sector. As a result, the government-aligned newspaper *Izvestiya* [reported](#) in December 2023 that Russia was short of about 4.8 million workers. Some of the shortfall can probably be made up by migrants from former Soviet states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but not all, particularly for skilled work.

Immigrants from Russia – particularly those who do not seem to oppose the war, but would merely prefer not to fight in it themselves – have been viewed with suspicion in most of the countries where they have arrived in large numbers, such as Georgia. But there is a good case for Western countries to tolerate and even incentivise more emigration from Russia, particularly by those with skills that would otherwise be put to use in the war economy.

Third, Russia has historically been vulnerable to political unrest when defeated in war. Sometimes, as with the end of serfdom following the Crimean War, and the establishment of the Duma (parliament) following the Russo-Japanese war, unrest has led to positive change. Sometimes, as with the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, it has led to chaos and civil strife, but at least Russia's neighbours have benefited from a weakened and distracted Kremlin. The West needs to invest much more into increasing the military pressure on Russian forces in Ukraine, creating the conditions in which the human and material costs of continuing to occupy Ukrainian territory are unsustainable.

That means the West ridding itself of two fears. The first is the fear of escalation – epitomised by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's reluctance to supply long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine in case that draws

Germany into conflict with Russia. French President Emmanuel Macron, by contrast, has understood that the logic of deterring Putin demands that France should not rule out the deployment of French troops in Ukraine. In the past, even when Putin might have had cause to confront NATO forces directly (notably when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter in 2015) he has prudently avoided doing so. But since the start of the war in Ukraine, Putin often tried to create a kind of ‘unilateral nuclear deterrence’, threatening to use Russia’s nuclear weapons against Ukraine or its Western allies in order to create the space for Russia to keep attacking Ukraine with conventional weapons. The three Western nuclear powers, rather than accepting Putin’s framing of the situation, need to reassert the principle that deterrence is mutual: Putin should not assume that the West will give in to nuclear blackmail and limit its efforts to help Ukraine. An explicit return to the concept of mutually-assured destruction will be politically controversial in some countries, above all Germany, as it was in the Cold War, but the alternative is to accept that Putin can get what he wants by threatening to use nuclear weapons.

The second fear is the fear of change in Russia. For some [analysts](#), Russia’s defeat and disintegration would be at least as much of a threat to the West as its victory – though there is [little evidence](#) that such a comprehensive collapse would be likely, no matter how catastrophic a defeat Russia might suffer. Other Western figures, ranging from the [former head of the UK’s Secret Intelligence Service](#) to [Donald Trump](#), expect Russia to survive defeat, but have warned that any successor to Putin might be worse. Indeed, he (and it will be ‘he’) might be worse – but equally, he might not. In any case, sooner or later someone will succeed Putin – either because he retires, is deposed or dies. Stalin was not succeeded by Lavrentiy Beria, the sadistic head of the NKVD secret police, but by Nikita Khrushchev, ushering in a period of (relative) liberalisation and East-West dialogue. And even if Putin’s successor shares his revanchist views, it is likely to take him time to consolidate his power base. Putin has every reason to fear change; the West has every reason to hope for it. It makes no sense to fear the replacement of a leader who launched the largest war of aggression in Europe since World War Two.

Finally, the West should not over-estimate its ability to provoke or influence change in Russia – even a military defeat for Moscow might not be enough – but it should be prepared in case change comes unexpectedly. In the 1984 elections to the Soviet ‘parliament’, the Supreme Soviet, 99.94 per cent of the votes went to candidates backed by the Communist Party, on a 99.99 per cent turnout. In 1987, when Margaret Thatcher [convened](#) a group of the most knowledgeable academic and governmental experts on the Soviet Union to assess where Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms might lead, there was broad agreement that “the Soviet system might at best evolve in 20 years time into something resembling Yugoslavia”. No-one at that time would have suggested the need for contingency planning in case of the total collapse of the communist system. But by 1992, the system had indeed collapsed. The Putin regime looks more resilient today than the Soviet Union looked in 1987; but it might turn out to be just as brittle.

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