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The Chronicles of Putin, pt. 5

As expected, Vladimir Putin won this year's controversial presidential election by a record margin. What can Russians expect over the next six years?

Following his triumph, Vladimir Putin's words were pithy: 'We will think about the future of our great homeland, about the future of our children. And if we act accordingly, we are certainly doomed to success!' When Putin gave his speech after being elected president on 18 March 2018, he was celebrated. Since then, Russia has witnessed very divergent fortunes. In the same year, many Russian metropolises successfully hosted the Football World Cup. In 2020, Putin dismissed his most loyal protégé, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. He then made extensive changes to the constitution, which made it possible for him to become president again in 2024.

In parallel, Russia's new dark side became increasingly apparent. In the same six years, the Russian state began to diligently brand independent journalists and public figures with the 'foreign agent' label. Today, there are more than 300 people on this list who, according to a new law, are no longer even allowed to work with advertisers. Putin's most important political opponent Alexei Navalny was poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok by the Russian secret service in August 2020. After treatment in Germany and his return in January 2021, he was imprisoned on fictitious criminal charges.

A sort of referendum on the war

But that was not the most important and bloodiest event of Putin's past term in office. 24 February 2022 made history when the Kremlin leader launched a full-scale military invasion of neighbouring Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands of people have since died in this war, and there is no end in sight.

Putin's current re-election was a kind of referendum on this course and the war. It was intended to legitimise the invasion of Ukraine and show that the Russian population supports this insane undertaking. The

authorities did everything they could to avoid surprises. A month before the election, Navalny – who had actively urged Russians to go to the polls and vote against Putin – died suddenly, hidden in a remote penal colony in the Arctic north. All independent candidates who criticised the war and the head of state were not allowed to stand for election.

Working towards the 'correct' result was not without pressure.

Additionally, for the first time, the presidential election lasted three days. This made any attempts at fraud by the authorities considerably easier. Electronic voting was also introduced in 29 regions, which had previously been tested for the first time in the 2021 parliamentary elections and already raised questions about the results of the count at the time. Opposition candidates who won in the polling stations lost after the results of the online vote were added up.

Working towards the 'correct' result was not without pressure. Authorities, state-owned companies and private businesses were ordered to send their employees to the polling stations on the first day of voting, a working day. Electronic voting was also possible at the workplace. In addition to achieving a high voter turnout, the authorities offered voters numerous bonuses, from tickets to amusement parks to restaurant visits. In the occupied territories of Ukraine, the Russian head of state was also elected, literally at gunpoint; armed soldiers were deployed at every polling station. The only shadow over the staging was on the last day of the election, 17 March. Following the call of the Russian opposition in exile, numerous Russians formed kilometre-long queues outside the polling stations at 12 noon sharp to vote for candidates other than Putin or to invalidate their ballot papers.

A serious blow to Putin's legitimacy

Given the complete opacity of the vote count, it is difficult to judge the extent to which these actions influenced the election result. It is almost impossible to say how many votes were cast invalidly or in favour of candidates other than Putin. In any case, Putin's legitimacy was dealt a serious blow by the election process.

The authorities were apparently convinced that anti-war sentiment in Russia is very strong. More people attended Navalny's funeral on 1 March than any rally in support of the war. Just two months earlier, back in January of the Russian winter, long queues formed to sign up for the presidential candidacy of anti-war candidate Boris Nadezhdin — the

Kremlin then prevented him from registering.

Nominally, according to the Central Election Commission, the desired increase has now been achieved. Seventy-seven per cent turnout instead of 67 per cent last time, 87 per cent instead of 77 per cent of the vote for Putin. Russian state propaganda enthusiastically presents this as Russians uniting around their leader. 'I rarely cry. But when I heard these words, I actually burst into tears. The mascara ran. I have never felt such joy and pride (...) With anxious, almost religious trepidation, with bated breath, I now wait every day for the repetition of these feelings. When all Russian countries return to Russia, just as Crimea returned ten years ago.' This is how Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the Russian foreign propaganda channel RT, expressed her feelings on social media.

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They echo the so-called Crimean Consensus, which the Kremlin proposed to Russian society in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea: expanding the territory and strengthening sovereignty to compensate for a deteriorating economic situation, starting with a devaluation of the rouble and a decline in real wages. But this consensus was turned on its head in 2022. Whereas before the invasion it was possible to go about one's business relatively calmly and pursue private preferences in a non-political manner, it is now necessary to swear allegiance to the state ideology and support the war. The most telling example here is a party of almost 'naked' Russian celebrities in a Moscow nightclub around December 2023. The event triggered a broad response in patriotic circles. All participants then were forced to publicly support the war, travel to the territories occupied by Russia, vote for Putin and announce this on social networks.

As far as relations with the outside world are concerned, for once Putin is not looking back, especially not towards Western countries. The current election procedure no longer adheres to basic Western standards. Putin sees himself as the leader of the anti-Western world and the Global South, while his most important allies – China, Iran, North Korea and Syria – have nothing to do with democracy.

One way or another, the central issue for Russia over the next six years will remain the war in Ukraine. It is Putin's biggest failure of his political

career — and this needs to be rectified. The Russians must expect unpopular economic measures, they must ‘tighten their belts’. The transition to a war economy and a new wave of mobilisation will not be enough. However, if Putin still fails to achieve his goals in the next six years, he will have the opportunity to be re-elected in 2030 with the current level of confidence.



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