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Putin's "re-election": An undemocratic, authoritarian plebiscite

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SWP Comment

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Putin's "Re-election"

An Undemocratic, Authoritarian Plebiscite

Sabine Fischer

No Russian election since Soviet times has been manipulated to the extent we are seeing in the 2024 "presidential election". The political context is dictatorial, the regime's power grab comprehensive. The media are subject to wartime censorship, and there is not even a pretence of political competition. The death of Alexei Navalny has only heightened the atmosphere of fear. Yet although the vote is an authoritarian plebiscite, a rubber stamp, signs of popular criticism of the regime and the war should not be overlooked. Germany and Europe should unequivocally state that this election is undemocratic and illegitimate. But even more importantly, contacts with critics of the war inside Russia must be maintained.

The Russian regime's key domestic political project of the past decade culminates on 17 March 2024, with Vladimir Putin's "re-election" as president. Putin will be confirmed in office for the fifth time, and – actually in violation of the constitution – for the third time in succession. The Kremlin has long been working towards this moment. The Russian state responded to the wave of demonstrations against Putin and his regime in winter 2011/12 by switching to authoritarian stabilisation in all political spheres. The lower chamber of parliament, the State Duma, passed a succession of new laws designed to gradually eliminate political opposition and independent civil society. The means for manipulating elections were systematically optimised. The Duma elections in 2016 and 2021, the 2018 presidential election, and the local and regional elections of recent years should be under-

stood as trials for this year's "presidential election". The state-controlled media have mutated into a powerful propaganda tool, while independent journalism has been stamped out entirely. The dominant propaganda narrative has grown into a quasi-ideology over time, a concoction of ultra-conservatism, imperialism, anti-Americanism, chauvinism, illiberalism and anti-feminism.

The regime exploited the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to stoke nationalist sentiment in broad sections of society. But the effect only lasted until 2018, after which the repression had to be expanded and the propaganda ramped up, in order to shield the state from growing dissatisfaction in the population.

In 2020 Putin took the decisive step of securing his grip on power "legally" with a new constitution. While it still limits the



president to no more than two consecutive six-year terms, it restarts the clock in 2024. This “annulment” of his previous terms would permit Putin to remain head of state until 2036. The reform was rushed through by dubious means during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic and “confirmed” in a heavily manipulated referendum in July 2020.

The Russian state responded to the Covid pandemic and the democracy movement in neighbouring Belarus in August 2020 with a dramatic political radicalisation. This culminated in the full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, which in turn triggered another wave of autocratisation. Russia is today a dictatorship with totalitarian and fascist tendencies. All these strands come together in the 2024 “presidential election”.

Electoral process and institutions

The new constitution heavily restricts eligibility to stand for the presidency. Candidates must have lived permanently in Russia for at least twenty-five years (previously ten). And – in a departure from the pre-2020 constitution – they must not ever have possessed citizenship of or residency in any other state. However, Russian citizens who “previously held the citizenship of a state that has in whole or in part become part of the Russian Federation” are explicitly excluded from the new restriction. This arrangement is designed to accommodate the annexed regions of Ukraine, but would also cover any other territories that might be annexed in future.

There are several routes to a candidacy. A candidate standing for a party that is not represented in the State Duma must submit 100,000 signatures to the Central Election Commission (CEC). Of these, no more than 2,500 may originate from any single region. Independent candidates face even greater obstacles. First of all, they are required to form an initiative group of five hundred public figures (*doverennye litsa*) who are prepared to support their candidacy. And then they need to submit 300,000 signatures

(maximum 7,500 per region), in order to be registered by the CEC.

Control over the informal practices of the electoral process is central – and even more important than the formal rules. It lies largely in the hands of the so-called domestic political bloc within the presidential administration, for which Sergei Kirienko is responsible. Kirienko (61) has been deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration since 2016. In the 1990s he was regarded as a “liberal technocrat”. Under Vladimir Putin Kirienko has enjoyed a meteoric career in various state agencies. His responsibility for central areas including electoral oversight, the Russian regions and the annexed Ukrainian territories gives him important levers of power. The domestic political bloc instructs and supervises the leaderships of the regions and ensures that election turnout and results satisfy expectations.

The Central Election Commission, headed since 2016 by Ella Pamfilova (60), is responsible for technical implementation and procedures. Like Kirienko, she also has a “liberal past”. Since 2016 her role has been to arrange and defend the manipulation of the presidential and Duma elections.

The regime employs a multitude of instruments to control the electoral process. The signature lists are currently the central tool for controlling the field, by excluding candidates on grounds of “formal errors”.

In 2020 voting was extended from one to three days. The longer period expands the opportunities for ballot stuffing and other irregularities such as falsification of electoral registers and turnout.

Electronic voting has been expanded since 2019. For the 2024 “presidential election” it will be available in 29 regions accounting for more than 47 million residents (and more than 43 percent of the electorate). This makes the election process even less transparent and creates additional possibilities to falsify the results. Possibilities to observe the vote, such as public access to video feeds from polling stations, have been heavily curtailed.

Over the years the Russian state has made independent election monitoring

essentially impossible. The 2018 presidential election was the last election of any kind to be observed by the OSCE. In the run-up to the 2021 Duma election the Russian government restricted the number of OSCE observers to a point where credible monitoring would have been impossible. As a result, the OSCE cancelled the mission. Moscow has invited increasing numbers of pro-Russian election observers, mostly from left- and right-wing populist parties in EU member states, including figures from the right-wing Alternative for Germany and the German Left Party. These “election observers” have even operated in annexed Crimea, in contravention of international law. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) also sends observers. The regime cites the approval of both groups as evidence that its elections are free and fair.

Systematic election monitoring by civil society groups is no longer possible. The Movement for Defence of Voters’ Rights – Golos (meaning “vote” or “voice”), which had operated highly professionally for many years, was declared a “foreign agent” in 2013 and liquidated by the Ministry of Justice in 2016. Golos regrouped to continue its work without registration but found itself subject to increasingly harsh repression. In 2021 it was again classified as a “foreign agent”. Many of its members have been in exile since 2022. Its most influential leader, Grigory Melkonyants, was detained in Moscow in August 2023. The state prosecutor accuses him of having collaborated with an “undesirable organisation”. Golos had been a member of the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), but ended the relationship after the EPDE was declared an “undesirable organisation” in Russia in 2018. The incarceration of Grigory Melkonyants is yet another measure to assert complete control over the electoral process. He will be on remand until at least mid-April and is unlikely to be released any time soon.

The candidates

Vladimir Putin is standing as an independent, as he has done in all presidential elections since 2000. The intention is to demonstrate his broad popular appeal and show that he is willing and able to gather the necessary signatures himself rather than depending on a party. The ruling party, United Russia, which was founded in the early 2000s to create a parliamentary majority for Putin and secure the regime’s grip on the regions, merely “supports” Putin’s candidacy. For two decades, Putin has used his apparent distance to United Russia to present himself as standing aloof of the grubby business of politics. The party is very unpopular and serves as a lightning rod for dissatisfaction and criticism.

As an independent candidate Putin was required to assemble an initiative group. His comprises more than 540 supporters from fields including culture, show-business, the media and academia. Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of the propaganda station RT, is among them, as is the ultranationalist film director Nikita Mikhalkov. The group also includes representatives of state agencies, some of which indicate their support for Putin’s candidacy on their websites. Using administrative resources for electoral purposes clearly violates the rules.

Putin’s election team announced in January that more than 2.5 million people had given their signature for his candidacy. 315,000 signatures were submitted to the CEC, which examined a sample of 60,000 and confirmed their validity. Observers noted that there had been little in the way of visible public activity for Putin’s signature gathering. There is reason to suspect massive use of administrative resources, for example through state agencies and businesses requiring their staff to sign collectively. The CEC registered Putin’s candidacy on 29 January 2024.

Apart from Putin, three other candidates have been permitted to stand: Nikolay Kharitonov (75) from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), Vladislav

Davankov (39) from the New People party and Leonid Slutsky (56) from the so-called Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). Altogether fifteen individuals had applied to stand. In 2018 there were thirty-six applicants, nine of whom were approved.

There is little in the way of politics in the 2024 “election campaign”. Over the course of the past decade the regime has successively stamped out political competition and pluralistic political debate in the public sphere. All that remains is a plebiscite-style rubber-stamping of Putin’s power. As in the registration phase, Putin enjoys enormous advantages over the other candidates during the campaign itself. In particular, he is a permanent presence in the state-controlled media. In February 2024 Western media revealed that the Kremlin had invested the equivalent of several hundred million euros in propaganda to secure Putin’s rule.

Putin’s public appearances spotlight specific topics. At his annual press conference in December 2023 and during his interview with Tucker Carlson in February 2024 he placed great weight on patriotism and Russia’s “defensive struggle” against the collective West — as the narrative frame for the “special military operation” in Ukraine. On other occasions he has underscored ultraconservative “traditional values” concerning marriage, the family, education and religion, which were included in the new constitution in 2020. In the same vein, 2024 was declared the “year of the family” in Russia. Putin also uses factory visits and meetings with business representatives to create an impression of economic dynamism, prosperity and normality. In his address to the Federal Assembly (*poslanie*) on 29 February 2024 Putin drew all these themes together in the context of the war. He underlined that Russia was capable and determined to achieve its war aims (victory over “Nazism”), and emphasised that the country’s entire fate hung on the resolve of the troops at the front. An electoral programme is nowhere to be found, not even on his campaign website. Putin’s electoral programme is Putin himself.

His “competitors’” campaigns are similarly vacuous. Nikolay Kharitonov has virtually no profile independent of his party, the CPRF. He has no campaign website of his own and stands simply for his party’s socialist-national policies. Leonid Slutsky campaigns on the legacy of his predecessor Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose vulgar imperialism and chauvinism influenced Russian politics for decades. The most prominent slogan on Slutsky’s website is “Zhirinovskiy’s cause lives on!” Slutsky has no electoral programme either. Vladislav Davankov from the New People party is the only candidate to offer a rudimentary political programme on his website, with demands including less red tape and more civil liberties. But on the key issue of the “special military operation” he hews the official line, saying that he supports “peace and negotiations” — “but on our terms, with no withdrawals”.

From the regime’s perspective turnout is crucial to appearances. There are indications that the Kremlin approached Gennady Zyuganov (79, CPRF) and Alexey Nechayev (57, New People) in autumn 2023 to persuade them to stand. As leaders of their respective parties both are considerably better known than the candidates ultimately chosen (Kharitonov and Davankov respectively) and would probably have mobilised more voters on election day. Kharitonov and Davankov did not feature at all when respondents were asked to name candidates unprompted in a survey conducted by the independent Levada Centre in December 2023. Leonid Slutsky from the LDPR has great difficulty stepping out of the shadow of his prominent predecessor Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who died of Covid-19 in 2022. His positions are just as extreme and chauvinistic as Zhirinovskiy’s, but he lacks the latter’s public recognition. That is detrimental to “project turnout”, so — according to media reports — Slutsky’s campaign receives a helping hand from the presidential administration. A survey by the state-controlled polling organisation VCIOM on 15 February 2024 predicted 79 percent for Vladimir Putin, streets ahead of Davankov,

Kharitonov (each 4 percent) and Slutsky (2 percent).

The excluded

Alexei Navalny was Vladimir Putin's most dangerous rival. Until he died this February at the age of 47, Navalny had been Russia's most successful opposition leader for the past decade and a half and played a central role in the anti-regime protests of winter 2011/12. In 2013 he scored a surprise success in the mayoral election in Moscow, where he came second behind the incumbent Sergey Sobyenin despite massive manipulation. He was found guilty in a politically motivated corruption trial and given a suspended prison sentence – which meant he was barred from standing in elections. In 2016 Navalny succeeded in having the verdict overturned by the European Court of Human Rights, and immediately announced his candidacy for the 2018 presidential election. He generated significant enthusiasm across the country, especially among the younger generation. Soon he was on trial for supposed corruption yet again, and in 2017 received a five-year suspended sentence. The verdict gave the CEC grounds to reject his candidacy. Navalny and his supporters continued their political struggle by other means, strategically supporting candidates from the systemic opposition in order to weaken the ruling party United Russia. Their “smart voting” strategy (*umnoye golosovaniye*) produced a string of unexpected successes in local elections in particular. Navalny's foundation also continued its investigations and exposed corruption at the highest levels of the state. Their films implicating Dmitry Medvedev (2017) and Vladimir Putin (2021) were viewed by millions.

Navalny only barely survived a poisoning in August 2020. In January 2021 he was arrested on his return to Moscow and sentenced to a total of twenty years in a “special regime” penal colony in a succession of show trials. From prison Navalny repeatedly and sharply criticised the war in

Ukraine. He died in prison on 16 February 2024. This slow-motion political assassination has finally ensured that Putin's most determined adversary will never be able to stand in a presidential election.

In November 2023 the largely unknown Yekaterina Duntsova (40) unexpectedly announced that she intended to stand for the presidency. Duntsova, a journalist and local politician from Rzhev north-west of Moscow, called for democracy, greater tolerance for LGBTIQ* people, and greener and more social policies. But above all she voiced openly anti-war positions in public. While she was largely ignored by the state-controlled media, independent exile outlets reported extensively on her campaign, which also gained traction on social media. Duntsova was frequently compared with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who almost certainly actually won the 2020 Belarusian presidential election against Alexander Lukashenko. Together with Maria Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkalo, Tsikhanouskaya became a figurehead of the Belarusian democracy movement. It is quite plausible that precisely that comparison is what led the Russian regime to immediately remove Yekaterina Duntsova from the contest, in order to preclude any risk of a Russian “Tsikhanouskaya effect”. The Central Election Commission discovered “serious errors” in the membership list of Duntsova's initiative group and refused her registration.

Boris Nadezhdin (60), who sought to stand for the insignificant liberal Civic Initiative, managed to get a little further. Nadezhdin has been active in politics since the 1990. Liberal circles within the extra-systemic opposition have frequently accused him of allowing himself to be instrumentalised by the Putin regime, for example in his frequent appearances on propaganda talk shows on state-controlled television stations. Nadezhdin criticised the “special military operation”, although a great deal more cautiously than Duntsova. His campaign gained considerable momentum in January 2024, again completely unexpectedly. In many places people queued to sign his list despite the great personal

risk. Other opposition leaders successively expressed their support. The first to do so was Yekaterina Duntsova, after her own candidacy had been rejected. Leaders in exile or prison followed, including Maxim Katz, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Alexei Navalny. By early February Nadezhdin claimed to have more than 200,000 signatures, of which he submitted the required 100,000 after thorough checking. Predictably, the CEC announced that 9,000 of them contained “formal inadequacies”, putting an end to his candidacy.

It is not impossible that Nadezhdin’s candidacy was coordinated with the Kremlin. Various motives would be conceivable for such a step: permitting a “tame” liberal politician to run could serve to test the mood. His defeat could further demoralise critics of the regime and the war and boost the regime’s “legitimacy” in the eyes of the majority. But as so often, the Kremlin was hoist with its own petard. Duntsova’s and Nadezhdin’s initiatives revealed the significant potential for mobilisation against the war — as underlined by the recent protests by wives of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. Duntsova and Nadezhdin both benefitted from the work of independent Russian media operating in exile. While the state-controlled media in Russia largely ignored their campaigns, the news website Meduza, *Novaya Gazeta*, the television channel TVRain and many others reported extensively. An interview with Boris Nadezhdin in January 2024 by the political scientist and commentator Ekaterina Schulmann — who lives in exile in Berlin — has been viewed more than one million times on YouTube. Without the exile media’s reporting, Duntsova’s and Nadezhdin’s campaigns would have had little public impact. These media also offered a platform for collective mourning of Alexei Navalny, and were crucial to the mass attendance at his funeral on 1 March 2024. The procession quickly turned into a political demonstration, with chants of “No to the war!”, “Russia without Putin!” and “Russia will be free!”.

Legitimacy lost – What now?

In the 2010s Russia was an electoral autocracy with competitive niches, where the political opposition was still able to achieve minor successes. Although these were largely restricted to the local level, two more or less extra-systemic candidates — Grigory Yavlinsky and Ksenia Sobchak — managed to stand in the 2018 presidential election. Now, in 2024, there is not even controlled competition. The “election” is an authoritarian plebiscite to confirm Vladimir Putin’s power. The result is already clear: Putin will be re-elected, probably with a better result than in 2018 (when he received 77 percent).

The plebiscite takes place against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Putin is responsible for this illegal war and the associated crimes. In March 2023 the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest for the mass deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied territories.

Voting will also be held in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories. That is nothing new. Russia has been conducting elections in occupied Crimea since 2014, seating illegitimate representatives of Crimea in the Russian parliament (State Duma and Federation Council). In 2024 this provision, which contravenes international law, applies to five Ukrainian regions with a pre-war population of about ten million.

There are thus many reasons to declare the 2024 Russian presidential election illegitimate. That has been demanded by the Russian exile opposition, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the Ukrainian government. There is precedent: In 2020 the EU refused to recognise the legitimacy of Lukashenka’s rule after the rigged presidential election in August. The domestic situation in Russia differs in two respects from Belarus in 2020. Firstly, there is no alternative candidate whose victory could be prevented by election fraud. And secondly, it must be assumed that — unlike Belarus in 2020 — President Putin does

actually still enjoy the support of a majority of the Russian population.

Vladimir Putin has been subject to Western sanctions since 2022, and has very little direct contact with Western leaders. Germany and the EU should take a clear stance on the authoritarian and illegitimate character of the plebiscite in mid-March 2024, to send a strong message to Russians at home and abroad who are critical of the regime and the war. And the EU should add further individuals involved in organising the “election” to its sanctions list. But that will not change the relationship with the Russian president in the short term nor do anything to alter domestic political circumstances in Russia. It would appear more important to respond to the democratic and anti-war initiatives witnessed in the run-up to the election. That would mean doing everything to support Russia’s democratic opposition, its independent civil society, and independent media – both within the country (to the extent that is possible) and in exile – and ensuring that they continue to reach dissenters in Russia. But political change in Russia remains extremely unlikely, as long as Putin can continue to persuade the elites (and to some extent the population) that his war in Ukraine is winnable.

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