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“Russia End State:

Putin’s Presidential Election; Russia’s Rorschach-Test?”

***By Mark Galeotti, Dmitry Gorenburg, David Lewis,
and Graeme P. Herd***

Introduction

Russians will vote in a presidential election between March 15-17 and incumbent Vladimir Putin will be inaugurated on May 7, 2024 (technically for his first term after the constitutional changes of January 2020). Although a major national event, in practical-procedural terms this election’s outcome is preordained. Russia’s Central Election Commission (CEC) ensures that Putin runs against state-sanctioned blank-slate “systemic opposition” stand-ins (i.e. the imitation opposition) and uses the pro-war symbol Latin letter “V” in the colors of the Russian flag alongside the words “Together we are strong — vote for Russia!” to promote the election. The slogan and symbol underscores Dmitry Peskov’s remark in October 2023: “our presidential election is not really democracy, it is costly bureaucracy. Mr. Putin will be re-elected next year with more than 90 percent of the vote.”

Paradoxically, however, as the election is stage-managed and tightly controlled to give the illusion and legitimacy of a democratic ritual, it is not the outcome that is revealing, but *how* and *by whom* the stage itself is managed. *What* level of effort did the regime need to put in through pre-rigging and other means to isolate the opposition and narrow the gap between the announced and achieved result? Turnout matters. In the 2018 presidential elections, Putin received 76.7% of the vote with a 67.5% turnout. Whatever the overall percentage split in 2024, this 2018 benchmark will be topped. The total number of voters in the Russian Federation as of January 1, 2024 is 112.3 million people, a 4.39 million increase due to inclusion of new constituent entities of the Federation – Ukraine’s “occupied territories.” If the “new regions” had not been included then the number of people with active suffrage in Russia would have decreased by 168,162 compared to July 1, 2023.

Given the election’s inevitable outcome, we know the power of the presidency and so Putin’s agency. But what does the electoral process tell us about Russian thought processes, narratives, and perceptions (Russia’s Rorschach test) as inferred by electoral strategies and practices? How,

for example, does Aleksei Navalny's murder in captivity impact the election? What can the electoral process, including or even especially those in Ukraine's "occupied territories," tell us about the evolving nature of the Putin's regime? This regime is, after all, two-thirds in, 4 terms (2000-2024) with a potential next two-terms and so 12 years to go (2000-2036). Will Putin use the new "mandate" to shape domestic and foreign policy goals through to 2030? Which power centers or kremlin-towers compete to set the agenda and which are successful? Might the winners and losers of such power competition within the elite be reflected in post-election reshuffles?

Navalny's "Slow Motion Murder"

Aleksei Navalny died on February 16, 2024 in the "Polar Wolf" Correctional Facility No. 3 (abbreviated as IK-3, in Russian) maximum-security penal colony in Russia's Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. IK-3 is a 'red' regime, that is, a Russian prison where the local authorities and FSB exercise total control. Navalny was "purposefully" killed in a "slow motion murder," his death attributed to poor prison conditions (i.e. it could have happened at any time); but decisions about the conditions of detention for prisoners of Navalny's caliber come straight from Putin (i.e. it was inevitable).

What does Navalny's death tell us about perceptions of Putin's regime and how it evolves? First, Navalny's murder illustrates that Russia has evolved from a hybrid authoritarian state that is managed through intrigue and *dramaturgiia* (political theater) to one that, lacking the murderous grandiosity of Stalin, has settled for "Banana republic" status (but without the bananas). His death does not necessarily signal that Putin's "calibrated coercion" has ended (no mass arrest of public mourners) but it does suggest that any prior distinctions between traitor and patriotic opposition is now totally meaningless.

Second, can we contend that Navalny's murder was a set-back for both the civilian political bloc in the presidential administration (First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergei Kiriyenko), responsible for delivering a stable and predictable election and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which entertains negotiation on Putin's terms? Navalny's death reinforces the notion that a murderous dictator cannot be trusted. As President Zelenskyy argued: "Putin kills whomever he wants, be it an opposition leader or anyone else who appears to be a target. After the murder of Alexei Navalny, it is simply absurd to see Putin as the supposedly legitimate head of the Russian state." Russia is not a "good faith" negotiation partner. This conclusion benefits those that provide Ukraine with security assistance and undercuts those that oppose it. Elsewhere, the reception in Ukrainian society of Navalny's death was muted, reflecting a mixed understanding of his legacy (both anti—corruption campaigner but also, at one time, a Crimea annexation booster) and indicating that there is little common ground between Ukrainian political sentiment and even liberal Russia.

Third, the Free Russia Foundation and Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation promote a March 17 "Noon against Putin," calling on Russian voters to go to polling stations at noon on Sunday March 17, the last day of the three-day voting period. When voting is the only legal act of opposition and when voters are offered a choice without a choice, visibly contrasting empty polling stations on March 15 and 16 will undercut the legitimacy of the election and allow opponents to the regime to feel solidarity.

Electoral Dynamics

We are within three weeks of Russia's presidential election. The needless murder of Navalny draws a global focus to this anemic election – nothing else will. The approved so-called opposition candidates will play their designated theatrical role. Pre-rigged administrative measures, such as stretching the voting process over three days and the addition of completely uncontrolled online voting option applied to 29 regions, inhabited by approximately 38 million voters, will get the desired result with some plausible deniability. “Voter banks” can be deployed even if their numbers are limited to the known realities of regional geographies.

The function of the Kremlin-orchestrated “systemic opposition” is to pretend that there is politics in Russia and boost voter turn-out, as a high turnout provides the necessary mandate. Which three candidates have been “green-lighted” to run against Putin? Leonid Slutsky (LDPR), the chairman of Russia's ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) has all the unpleasantness but none of the unhinged charisma of his predecessor, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The 75-year-old Nikolai Kharitonov, the Communist Party (CP) candidate, represents an archetypal “D-Lister.” Vladislav Davankov (“New People” Party), a 39-year-old State Duma deputy speaker, embodies a strange combination of slickness and aridity with political adverts extolling “entrepreneurs,” “building robots,” and “new people.”

Putin's political managers appear to have entertained two ways to frame the campaign. First, a high-risk strategy that would focus on the war and allow an explicitly anti-war non-systemic opposition candidate (Boris Nadezhdin, ‘New Initiative’ Party) to run. Nadezhdin's participation as an anti-war liberal candidate, followed by his inevitable defeat, would legitimize the election itself and thus Putin's mandate and manifesto. The process itself would provide a safety valve (a “form of psychotherapy”), allowing anti-war parts of the population to let off steam in a controlled way. His running would increase voter turnout and the collection of signatures would identify many who oppose the war - always handy in a police state. But Nadezhdin's running also risked a lower overall percentage of the vote for Putin, undermining the narrative of national cohesion and countenancing unpredictable elements in the election (with Navalny's death, Nadezhdin's anti-Putin anti-war but still patriotic message would have galvanized the protest-vote).

Second, the path that has been actually chosen is to treat the election in a business as usual “nothing-to-see-here” legitimacy ritual in which one's civic duty is to vote for Putin. On February 8, 2024 the CEC claimed to find 9,147 out of a sample of 60,000 voters' signatures in support of Nadezhdin to be “invalid” and Nadezhdin's challenges were rejected by Russia's Supreme Court. The risk of Nadezhdin's candidacy consolidating a war weary electorate and politicizing it, creating a protest movement, was judged too great and extinguished. Russian TV propaganda has once again presented Putin as an “independent,” a candidate above politics (no need to debate other candidates) and of the people, one who enjoys unprecedentedly high people's trust and whose re-election guarantees stability and order and prevents “outside interference.” In this framing of the campaign, the war is minimized and talk of a “mandate for mobilization” forbidden, but so too is any legal, peaceful, electoral, evolutionary, and moderate future democratic transition pathway.

As a legitimizing ritual, the election allows the state to top up its reservoir of political capital that it is then able to expend on future projects that may have high political costs but are deemed necessary nonetheless to achieve wider goals. In this sense, its outcome can shape policy

choices, such as mobilization (necessary if Russia is to mount major offensive operations in 2024), the balance between military spending and its effects on the economy, and Putin's sense of how comfortable and content the upper elite is with the broad direction of travel.

Voting in Ukraine's Occupied Territories (OT)

In Russia's lexicon, Ukraine's "temporarily occupied territories" are deemed to be "new regions," "new subjects," and "our historical regions." These regions first took part in a so-called Russian "referendum" in September 2022. Almost 4% of Russia's voters live in the "new regions" which consist of Russian-controlled territories in Zaporizhzhia region (470,342 voters), Kherson region (468,472 voters), so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic (1.97 million voters), and Luhansk Peoples Republic (1.65 million voters). Martial law has been in effect on the territory of the "new regions" since October 19, 2022, by Putin's decree. In 2023, electoral law amendments allow for a regional election voting under martial law (a CEC decision after consultations with the Ministry of Defense, the FSB, and the head of the relevant region) that was a trial run for the presidential election, which the CEC approved on December 11, 2023.

As in Russia, the presidential election in the "OT" is an empty legitimization ritual. It is primarily about the process itself. The ability to hold the election consolidates Russian presence if it occurs with minimum levels of disruption or security threats. Holding an election successfully is a demonstration of the level of Russian control (compare e.g. elections in Afghanistan in 2019 where Taliban attacks and threats forced low turnout and demonstrated weakness of central government control). Russia's Federation Council chair Valentina Matvienko states that the inclusion of the so-called "new regions" are "the culmination of their unification with Russia." It also serves as an acclamation of Putin as leader, as underscored by the lack of even an imitation campaign contested by CP, LDPR, or "New People." The process co-opts and binds "new collaborationists" to the regime (the extent to which this occurs highlights risk calculus based on predictive thinking) and so makes any future "de-Russification" or "de-occupation" much harder. It stress-tests the effectiveness and loyalty of local leaders and institutions, as they can be judged against the September 2023 regional election turn-out and so shape future budget streams, promotions, and OT reshuffles. Russia is aiming to politically consolidate its military occupation in such a way as to make any future territorial concessions much harder and to send a message that negotiated territorial trade-offs are off the table.

The "OT" are a laboratory for perfecting potential new electoral techniques, presidential and other, that could be then applied to Russia proper. First, the "OT" has a long pre-election voting period of a week or more within which election officials can collect votes by going house to house, which creates pressure on people to vote. Second, every territorial election commission can decide which form of identification can be used to vote in the presidential election, potentially including people holding Ukrainian passports. Allowing citizens of Ukraine to vote undermines the procedural legitimacy of the election but boosts the performance legitimacy (i.e. total percentage). A 70% turn out would be considered a success in the "OT." Third, in the "OT" much greater secrecy and classification of information about the election occurs than in Russia. If these practices were taken to their logical conclusion, they might begin to question the need for systemic opposition in Russia itself.

Conclusions

Putin's fifth (or first) presidential term on May 7, 2024 does not provide a new political mandate or itself act as catalyst or watershed triggering or signaling Russian near-term new change of policy course. Russian "encirclement" propaganda as propagated by Sergei Naryshkin, suggests that the United States is planning to destabilize Russia by "activating" as a fifth column 80,000 Russian graduates of American educational and cultural programs, such as Access, Advance, FLEX, Fulbright, Global UGRAD, Summer Work and Travel, and others. Andrei Klimov, chairman of the Federation Council Commission for the Protection of State Sovereignty and the Prevention of Interference in the Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, suggests the West's strategic task is to make an anti-Russian groundwork for the elections to the State Duma in 2026 and for the next presidential elections in 2030.

If the election propaganda serves to uphold and reinforce current narratives around continuity and stability, we can expect that after May 7, 2024 Putin will adopt a wait-and-see approach. He waits, first and foremost, to see the result of the U.S. election on November 7, 2024, and then to see the levels of U.S. and European support for Ukraine. If western support holds, then this, not the election, will shape policy decisions around mobilization and expectations around the duration of the war. Under these conditions, Russia continues its long-term confrontation with the West based on kinetic military attrition in Ukraine and non-kinetic attrition of the West through information warfare and other means, not least increased "Global South" engagement based on "traditional" and "conservative values" to gain leverage over the West.

The elections do impact thinking around the post-Putin leadership. Near future consensus successors such as Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin, Sergey Kiriyenko, and Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev have diminishing prospects as Putin moves to 2030. Longer-term younger representatives of influential groups in Putin's inner circle will now become more viable successors, looking to take over in the 2030s, including: 46-year-old Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev (the son of Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev), 48-year-old Secretary General of United Russia Andrei Turchak, 54-year-old head of the Moscow region, Andrei Vorobyov (representative of the clan of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the son of his close associate Senator Yuri Vorobyov), 46-year old Nizhny Novgorod governor Gleb Nikitin (Rostec), and former Minister of Economic Development Maxim Oreshkin.

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About the Authors

Dr. Mark Galeotti is director of the London-based consultancy Mayak Intelligence, an honorary professor at the University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, a senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and a senior non-resident fellow at the Institute of International Relations Prague. He is an expert and prolific author on transnational crime and Russian security affairs. His latest books include *Putin's Wars, from Chechnya to Ukraine* (London: Osprey, 2022) and *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022).

Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg is Senior Research Scientist in the Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs division of the Center for Naval Analysis, where he has worked since 2000. Dr. Gorenburg is an associate at the Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and previously served as Executive Director of the American Association of the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). His research interests include security issues in the former Soviet Union, Russian military reform, Russian foreign policy, and ethnic politics and identity. He currently serves as the editor of *Problems of Post-Communism*.

Dr. David Lewis is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Exeter. His research interests include international peace and conflict studies, with a regional focus on Russia and other post-Soviet states. Dr. Lewis is the author of numerous articles and books on Russia and Eurasia, including most recently *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

Dr. Graeme P. Herd is a Professor of Transnational Security Studies in the Research and Policy Analysis Department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His latest books include *Understanding Russia's Strategic Behavior: Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code* (London and New York, Routledge, 2022) and *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021).

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