



MARCH 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN RUSSIA

During recent presidential election in Russia held on March 18, 2018, incumbent President Vladimir Putin secured a vote of confidence by winning a landslide re-election victory. As a result, 65-year-old Vladimir Putin will extend his rule as a head of Russia for another six years until 2024. In fact, Putin has been president since 2000, stepping aside for one term as prime minister in order to comply with the Russian legislation, according to which presidents in Russia can't serve more than two consecutive terms.

Despite the fact that Putin's re-election was never in question, almost 109 million Russians who were eligible to vote at more than 97,000 polling stations nationwide had a choice of eight candidates. In fact, the recent election set the record for both the number of registered candidates running for the presidency and the number of applications submitted. The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Russia has received 34 applications to run for the presidency, 16 of which were from the political parties, while the remaining 18 were filed by self-nominated candidates. However, the majority of applicants were denied registration, including opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who had already been barred from running in the March elections *de jure* due to a criminal conviction in February 2017 for embezzlement, which many consider to be politically motivated. As for Putin, he was registered as a self-nominated candidate, and it was his third time running individually, while the ruling party United Russia, on behalf of which Putin was nominated in the 2012 election, extended its support to his re-election.

Unlike other candidates, Putin's team did not engage in traditional political campaigning during the pre-election period. The refusal to debate his opponents coupled with the lack of clarity over the key message of his election platform clearly demonstrated that the major goal of Putin's re-election campaign was not to hold an aggressive agitation, but to boost the turnout in Russia, especially in the large cities. The incumbent president's reportedly high rating served as a factor supporting the shift in the focus of Putin's campaign to ensuring a high level of the voter turnout. In fact, even though Putin did not release an official electoral program, the latest opinion surveys before the election date showed that his support reached 69%, which particularly fit the Kremlin's "70/70" scheme, where the election turnout should reach 70% with 70% of all votes going to Putin.

In order to prevent the recurrence of the 2016 parliamentary election situation, when the turnout dropped below 50%, the Kremlin pursued a proactive policy. For instance, the CEC hired consultants to help promote the election,

while influential state mass media networks were widely used to build a patriotic enthusiasm over the vote. It is worth noting that even the election date was moved in advance from March 11 to March 18, the day when Russia celebrates its reunification with Crimea, which is widely recognized among Russian citizens as Putin's greatest achievement. Finally, Putin's annual state of the nation address to the Federal Assembly held on March 1, 2018, the format of which underwent a number of changes in connection with the presidential election, was aimed at generating a deep sense of national pride and patriotism that was supposed to find its expression through the ballot box.

Moreover, there was an additional external factor that helped to mobilize the turnout. Recent confrontation between Russia and the United Kingdom over the poisoning of former double agent Sergei Skripal triggered a patriotic response by Russian citizens. Being pressured by London's accusations that Russia was behind the attack on Skripal, Moscow took advantage of the hype redirecting public attention to the voting process. As a result, the voter turnout at the March presidential election reached 67.54%, close to the 70% ambition of the Kremlin. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny's appeal to boycott the election did not significantly affect the situation.

According to the CEC, Vladimir Putin has gained 76.69% of votes, showing his best election result compared to 53% of votes in the 2000 presidential election, 71% in 2004 and 64% in 2012. 56.43 million voters out of 73.62 million people voted supported Putin's candidacy, which is about 10 million more than in 2012, when Putin faced a serious opposition movement and massive protest marches that took place in Moscow and other large cities after a massive voter fraud at the December parliamentary elections in 2011. Unlike the 2012 election, where Putin won just 47% of votes in Moscow, which is considered to be the main stronghold of the opposition, the 2018 election results show that the president-elect received the higher number of votes, gaining 70% of votes in the capital city. Moreover, the regions of the so-called "red belt", which comprise the predominantly agricultural areas of central Russia, a number of the southern regions of Siberia and the Far East, where the Communist Party is traditionally strong, shifted their support to Putin. Similar to the previous elections, the highest figures were recorded in the North Caucasus. Over 93.38% of voters supported Putin in Kabardino-Balkaria, while the percentage of Putin's supporters in Chechnya and Dagestan amounted to 91.44% and 90.76%, respectively. In addition to the North Caucasian republics, three more regions registered the

number of votes in favor of Putin exceeding 90%, namely, Crimea (92.15%), Tyva (91.98%), and Sevastopol (90.19%).

Putin's nearest competitor, Communist Party candidate Pavel Grudinin, got 11.77% of votes, marking the worst ever result for Russia's left-wing party, while leader of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy got 5.65% of votes. The only candidate to openly and strongly criticize Putin during the campaign, well-known media personality and liberal political activist Ksenia Sobchak nominated by the Civil Initiative Party garnered 1.68% finishing in the fourth place. She was followed by head of the Yabloko Party Grigory Yavlinsky (1.05%), Chairman of the Party of Growth Boris Titov (0.76%), Maxim Surakin nominated by the Communists of Russia Party (0.68%), and head of the Russian People's Union Party Sergei Baburin (0.65%). Despite a number of irregularities recorded at some polling stations across Russia, the CEC recognized the election as valid. In a change from his position in the past, the president-elect met with his seven defeated presidential challengers in the Kremlin in order to map out his main priorities for the forthcoming presidential term, which would be focused on improving the living standards of the Russian population by ensuring innovation development and economic growth. As a result, the Kremlin has finally dotted the i's and crossed the t's in regard to Russia's internal and external policies for the next six-year period.

It could be concluded that despite Russia's two-year recession amid lower oil prices and the country's deteriorating relations with the West Putin's dominance over the domestic political landscape has grown. The victory that was widely predicted completes the concentration of power in his hands providing a necessary room for geopolitical and economic maneuvers. Unless Putin decides otherwise and opts for constitutional changes, in 2024 Russia will face the need to choose another leader that highlights the problem of the forthcoming power transit in the country. According to some political analysts, during his fourth and, presumably, last term Vladimir Putin will most likely prepare his successor, with a person to be appointed as the prime minister as the most probable candidate. In fact, it is already known that the president-elect will announce the composition of the future government after his inauguration. On the other hand, there is still a chance that Putin could decide to extend his rule beyond 2024 by abolishing term limits or by shifting into another position of power.

Politics, Foreign Affairs and Security

- According to the Central Election Commission of Turkmenistan, the voter turnout in the parliamentary and local elections reached 91.69%. It was noted that over 3.2 million registered voters were able to vote at around 2,604 polling stations that operated in the country and 39 polling stations that were established at the diplomatic missions of Turkmenistan abroad.
- According to the National People's Congress of China, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was re-elected for a second five-year term. The National People's Congress delegates voted 2,964 in favor of his re-election with two votes against. At the same time, Wang Qishan was elected as Vice President.
- President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon made an opening speech at the high-level event to launch the International Decade for Action "Water for Sustainable Development 2018-2028" held in New York. On the sidelines of the event, the Tajik leader, met with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to discuss current issues regarding the effective use of water and energy resources for the benefit of the peoples of Central Asia.
- Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan Karim Kokrekbayev met with Chairman of the Kyrgyz Border Service Ularbek Sharsheyev to discuss prospective cooperation on border control, as well as the development of checkpoint infrastructure on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh state border.
- During his official visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev met with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss further intensification of mutual cooperation in terms of investment protection, space technologies, hydropower industry, petrochemicals, agriculture, and digitalization. As a result of the talks, the parties signed six agreements and memorandums on the cooperation in various fields.

Economy, Finance and Energy

- The Central Bank of Russia lowered the key rate from 7.5% to 7.25% per annum, one and a half months after the previous cut. It was noted that the bank forecasts annual inflation to be 3-4% in 2018 and remain close to 4% in 2019.

- According to the state-owned company Belarusian Railways, rail freight traffic between Belarus and Lithuania went up by 15% to 33.4 million tons in 2017. Meanwhile, the number of people transported by international passenger trains reached 285,900, which is a 4.7% decrease compared to 2016.
- During the fourth meeting of the Belarusian-South African committee on trade and economic cooperation held in Pretoria, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Andrei Dapkiunas met with Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry of South Africa Bulelani Magwanishe to discuss prospects for strengthening mutual trade and implementing joint economic projects, including joint ventures to produce tractors, cargo and passenger equipment, and process agricultural products.
- According to the OPEC, Azerbaijan's oil production is expected to decline by 0.03 million barrels per day year-on-year to average 0.77 million barrels per day in 2018. It was noted that crude oil production in January 2018 increased by 0.01 million barrels per day month-on-month to average 0.75 million barrels per day. Preliminary data on liquids production in February 2018 shows the output remained at the same level.
- According to the Steel Producers Association of Iran, over 20.02 million tons of crude steel was produced in the country during the first 11 months of the current fiscal year (March 2017-February 2018), which is a 19% increase compared to the same period of last year. It was also noted that during the reporting period Iran also produced about 18.11 million tons of various steel products, including beam, wide sheets, hot rolled sheets, galvanized steel and tubes, indicating a rise by 9% compared to 16.588 million tons produced in the same period of the preceding fiscal year.
- According to the Customs Administration of China, in January 2018 the trade turnover between Iran and China stood at \$3.8 billion, which is a 16.93% increase year-on-year. In January 2018, China's exports to Iran amounted to \$1.7 billion, which is a 10.3% decrease year-on-year, while China's imports from Iran increased by 56.4% reaching \$2 billion.
- According to the Central Bank of Uzbekistan, in March 2018 the country's gross gold and foreign exchange reserves amounted to \$28.336 billion decreasing by 1.53% compared to February 2018. In March 2018, the assets in

foreign currency exceeded \$14.715 billion, which is a 0.41% decrease. The volume of monetary gold in the gold and foreign exchange reserves of Uzbekistan decreased from \$13.988 billion to \$13.621 billion.

- According to the Oil Ministry of Iran, the country, on average, exported 2.6 million barrels of oil per day to Asian and European countries during the current fiscal year. The daily exports included 2.115 million barrels of crude oil and 428,000 barrels of condensates.

Society and Culture

- During his visit to New York, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It was noted that at present, about 150,000 people with disabilities, including about 26,000 children, live in Tajikistan.
- According to the Russian State Corporation Roscosmos, the manned spacecraft Soyuz MS-08 carrying the crew of three astronauts was placed into orbit. The Soyuz MS-08 spacecraft launched from the Baikonur spaceport is taking Russian cosmonaut Oleg Artemyev and NASA astronauts Andrew Feustel and Richard Arnold to the International Space Station.
- According to the Central Bank of Russia, the total turnover of remittances between Uzbekistan and Russia in 2017 amounted to \$2.785 billion, which is 41% more compared to 2016. At the same time, \$122.2 million of remittances were transferred from Uzbekistan to Russia in 2017, which is 40.45% less than in 2016.
- According to Chairman of the Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan Mazahir Panahov, more than 300 international observers will monitor the presidential election in Azerbaijan to be held in April 2018. It was noted that 280 short-term observers of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, as well as the CIS short-term observers, are not included in the list.
- As part of the U.S. government's Export Control and Border Security (EXBS) program, the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe donated a new regional training center for prevention of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear non-proliferation, and export control to the Government of Tajikistan. This regional center will aid the Nuclear Radiation and Safety Agency in its ability to provide enhanced interdiction training to its personnel in order to interdict illicit materials and other forms of contraband crossing the Tajik border.