

European
Elections monitor

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D-7
7 days before
the poll

Will Vladimir Putin be elected in the first round of the presidential election in Russia?

Around 110 million Russians are being called to vote on 4th March next to appoint the successor to Dmitri Medvedev (United Russia, ER), as president of the Federation of Russia. The outgoing Prime Minister and former Head of State (2000-2008), Vladimir Putin, is running favourite in an election the outcome of which has almost been decided from the start. The only suspense remaining is over the date of his future victory: will he be elected in the first round on 4th March or will he have to wait a few days more before returning as Head of State?

The vote for the presidential election started on 18th February last in the most distant areas of Russia (close to the North Poland and in the country's far east), for some professions (military, lighthouse keepers and sailors etc ...) as well as for Russians living abroad.

The general elections on 4th December last, which were won by the party in office, United Russia, were the source of anger on the part of some of the Russian population, who came down into the streets to denounce the electoral fraud that had taken place. The protest was the most virulent since Vladimir Putin rose to power 12 years ago. Since that time the situation has changed: whilst the Russians had suspected electoral fraud, they are now able to see the facts on the internet, several people indeed filmed various incidents that they then put on line.

Vladimir Putin supporters and the opposition movements demonstrated separately on 4th February in Moscow. The former rallied in Victory Park in Moscow under the banner "We have something to lose". They deployed a big banner on which they had written "Our vote will be for Putin". Opponents to the outgoing Prime Minister rallied on the same day under the banner "For honest elections". They brandished condoms and dollars in answer to Vladimir Putin, who compared the white ribbon, the protest movement's symbol, to a condom that had been funded from abroad. Their slogans were also focused the outgoing Prime Minister himself. The opposition also demonstrated in several towns in the provinces: 3000 rallied in St Petersburg, others in Magadan, Kabarovsk, Ekaterinburg, Irkutsk, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, Chelyabinsk, Ufa; Krasnodar, Sochi, Nijni Novgorod etc ...

The opposition is divided however and tension, even conflict, has been widespread amongst the representa-

tives of the various trends – far left militants, liberals, nationalists etc ... For the time being no leader has really emerged. The Russian middle class (made up of entrepreneurs, liberal professions, executives, who want to take part in political life and the State's business) has invested greatly in the present protest movement. "In the West the middle class is not revolutionary, but in Russia it is! Why? Because it is new, because it has just emerged, because it has a great deal of energy and because it wants to assert its rights and achieve a position. The development of civil society and the decline of the regime are two processes that are feeding off one another," stresses writer Boris Akunin who adds, "if Vladimir Putin is elected, it will be due to fraud and he will be a weak president."

The anti-Putin movements called for another demonstration under the banner "big white circle" on 26th February. Thousands of people bearing white ribbons (*Belatenta*), the colour of the protest movement, formed a human chain that was 16km long around the Sadovaya Koltso (the circle of gardens), the circular boulevard that extends 15.6km around the Kremlin, the official residence of the President of the Federation of Russia shouting "Don't let Vladimir Putin back into the Kremlin."

The day before thousands of people demonstrated in the country's second biggest town (and native city of United Russia's candidate) Saint Petersburg, with the watchword "Russia without Putin". On 26th February a rally took place in the same town, notably on the call of the opposition party, Yabloko.

Presidential election in Russia

4th March 2012

On 20th February last outgoing President Dmitri Medvedev met several opposition representatives. They declared that they were encouraged by the promises that had been made, notably with regard to support for greater participation by the parties opposed to the those in office in the next general elections. Vladimir Putin also said he intended to speak soon with the opposition leaders. "We need to renew the mechanisms of our democracy which has to take on board increasing citizen participation. It is necessary to create a political system in which it will be possible and necessary to speak the truth;" he declared. On 22nd February he stressed: "a legal opposition is vital in our opinion but it is important that everything remains within the law and the Constitution."

On 23rd February, a holiday in Russia devoted to those who defended the mother country, a celebration that remained after the end of the Soviet period, thousands of people met in the Lujinki Olympic Stadium in Moscow to "defend the country" and "support Vladimir Putin". On this occasion United Russia's candidate stood as the saviour of motherland, Russia. "We have come here to say that we love Russia and that we are ready to work for the good of our motherland, ready to defend it forever. We shall allow no one to impose anything on us," he declared. "The battle for Russia continues, victory will be ours!" he concluded, quoting the poet Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841).

On 20th February Vladimir Putin wrote a column in the daily Komsomolskaya Pravda in which he made several promises: doubling of teachers' salaries over the next five years (to reach 200% of the average salary) and a 20% to 30% reduction in house prices. Ignoring the official statistics the outgoing Prime Minister announced a rise in Russia's population (up to 154 million in 2050, whilst the Rosstat Institute is forecasting a decline of 16 million inhabitants by 2031).

Two days later he published a text on the military question in the newspaper Rossiiskaia Gazeta in which he promised "unprecedented rearmament" (strengthening of the air and space defence system to a total of 23,000 billion roubles – 590 billion € - over ten years). "We have to build a new, modern army that can mobilise at any time (...) the USA and NATO's policy in terms of anti-missile defence is pushing us towards this," writes Vladimir Putin who says he is convinced that "the revival of the military-industrial machine will become the driver of development in various sectors ..." It is not certain that the investment that concentrates on the system's traditional pillars (like the military industry and even raw materials)

will enable the leader of United Russia to improve his image within the Russian population.

Apart from Vladimir Putin, four other people are running in the presidential election:

- Guennady Zyuganov, leader of the country's leading opposition party, the Communist Party (KPRF);
- Vladimir Jirinovski, founder and leader of the ultra-nationalist and populist party, the Democratic Liberal Party (LDPR);
- Serguey Mironov, former leader of Fair Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya, SR) and former chair of the Council of the Federation, the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament;
- Mikhail Prokhorov, leader of the Juste Cause Party (Pravoe Delo, PD), a billionaire and businessman (believed by some to be the richest man in Russia; his fortune is estimated at 9.3 billion €), the head of an investment company Onexim and owner of the New Jersey (USA) basketball team, the Nets.

Guennady Zyuganov and Serguey Mironov have both condemned the attitude adopted by the media in the electoral campaign for the presidential election, deploring the lack of air time that has been attributed to them, whilst the outgoing Prime Minister has enjoyed all of the media's attention. However both men and Mikhail Prokhorov recently took their distance with the popular anti-Putin movements warning against the "orange pest" (a reference to the Ukrainian revolution in 2004) which would pose a threat to Russia. Hostile to the idea of organising a new round of general elections they have showed that they are reticent about relaxing the rules governing the registration of other political parties, since they are clearly scared by any possible competition.

Mikhail Prokhorov has signed an agreement with the League of Voters that focuses on the creation of a data base that registers the reports written by observers in the future presidential elections. Guennady Zyuganov and Serguey Mironov are due to ratify this text.

On 21st February last the newspaper Novaya Gazeta, the organisation that journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was murdered in 2006, worked for, declared that it was experiencing cash-flow problems. The accounts of its co-owner Aleksander Lebedev (to a total of 49%, the other owner being former Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1985-1991), Mikhail Gorbachev) have been frozen after a tax control. The payment of salaries has been suspended for a month but *Novaya Gazeta* continues to be published.

Radio Moscow Echo announced a reshuffle in its executive. Gazprom, its main shareholder, dismissed two independent directors from the board and demanded the control over the decisions taken by the nine other members who sit on it. *"It is an attempt to adjust our editorial policy"* denounced the radio's editor in chief Alexey Venediktov. Finally the private TV channel Dojd which has been covering the opposition demonstrations since December 2011, announced that it was the focus of a financial investigation.

On 16th February last the European Parliament asked the Russian authorities to start dialogue with the opposition as quickly as possible. MEPs said they were concerned about the ban (that again damages political competition and pluralism) launched against some candidates, notably Grigori Yavlinski, founder of the Yabloko Party, preventing him from running in the presidential election (the electoral commission considered that at least 24% of the signatures that he had collated to stand in the election, were not valid).

The Minister for Emergencies, Serguey Choygu (ER) suggested that the candidates in the presidential election sign an agreement that plans for new methods in the control of the counting of voting slips (including a second check on results transmitted via the copies of the reports of the committees in each electoral constituency and the filming of the voting results' reports). Serguey Mironov and Mikhail Prokorov have both said they will sign a document whilst Vladimir Jirinovski and Guennady Zyuganov are against it.

According to the most recent poll by VTsIOM published on 19th February last, Vladimir Putin is due to be elected

President of the Federation of Russia in the first round of the election with 58.6% of the vote. He is due to pull ahead of the Communist leader Guennady Zyuganov 14.8%, the ultra-nationalist Vladimir Jirinovski, 9.4%, Mikhail Prokorov 8.7% and Serguey Mironov 7.7%. Mikhail Prokorov is due to come second in the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg.

Vladimir Putin will therefore soon become President of the Federation of Russia, a post he had to give up in 2008. In spite of rising protest he is still the most popular and most credible politician in the country whose power no opposition candidate has succeeded in shaking.

And so nothing has changed in Russia and yet things are not really the same. The possibility of seeing the candidate in power being elected in the second round of voting has been forecast and the presidential election will take place under high security. Although Vladimir Putin is almost guaranteed to win a third term in office as head of Russia, he is facing an unprecedented opposition movement which leaves those in power vulnerable. During his future time as president he may not so easily be able to ignore the demands made by the Russian population; the authorities have already started to make proposals (return of direct universal suffrage to appoint regional governors; a better control by the State and citizens of public companies etc...) At the beginning of February Vladimir Putin also promised to make the oligarchs pay for the dishonest privatisations that were undertaken in the 1990's.

According to Richard Sakwa, professor of political science and a Russian specialist at the University of Kent in Canterbury, *"Vladimir Putin will not have to guarantee a free election but a free and honest presidency."*

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