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PRESIDENT PUTIN AND ELECTIONS

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Introduction

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is the current President of the Russian Federation. He has been elected to the country's highest office five times in twenty-four years and has served as its president for twenty years. He began his career as a Soviet spy and has climbed the ladder of power ever since. He has used many of his skills from his Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) days in his journey as a politician. From reportedly poisoning his opposition to quelling public unrest with violence, President Putin and elections have a troubled, controversial, violent, clandestine, and veiled relationship. This brief explores Vladimir Putin's electoral saga, from his early years as a KGB officer to becoming the most powerful man in Russia for two decades running.

History

History of Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Putin was born in Leningrad on the 7th of October 1952 - to an ordinary, middle-class Russian family. His mother was a housewife, and his father, a World War II, veteran was a foreman at the carriage works in Leningrad.¹ He completed his law degree from the Leningrad State University in 1975 and applied to the KGB.² The KGB was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic's (USSR or Soviet Union) intelligence bureau. As a junior member of the KGB, Mr. Putin was trained in Moscow and then assigned to a post in the KGB's Leningrad Field Office.³

During his time here, it is described that he "spent the majority of his time spying on foreigners and Russians who had contacts with them. He studied German and was eventually posted in Dresden in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), where he and his wife spent five years, and their two daughters were born."⁴

1 Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, "Childhood."

2 Herspring, "Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy."

3 ibid

4 ibid

In Germany, Mr. Putin worked very closely with the Stasi, the intelligence unit of East Germany. He immersed himself here as an active part of the East German police state.⁵ He left East Germany in 1989 due to the collapse of the communist experiment there and returned to Leningrad.⁶ Mr. Putin, now in the “active reserve” of the KGB, joined his alma mater as a deputy to the vice-rector.⁷ He also became an advisor to Professor Anatoly Sobchak.⁸ Mr. Putin would help his former professor run a successful election campaign to become the first democratically elected mayor of what was now St. Petersburg.⁹ Under Sobchak, Mr. Putin would become Deputy Mayor and would be made in charge of the external relations committee of St. Petersburg.¹⁰ In 1996, he left Sobchak after his failed re-election campaign and moved to the Kremlin. Here, Mr. Putin was appointed as the deputy head of the President’s Administrative Directorate (Property Management Directorate) under the Boris Yeltsin Administration.

Mr. Putin’s career in Russian politics would take off this year on; he would climb up the ranks of the Yeltsin administration, become one of his most trusted associates, and eventually succeed him as the Head of State of the Russian Federation in 2000.

History of the Russian Elections

The first Head of State of the Russian Federation was Boris Yeltsin. He was an ally of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in the initial stages of his political career. His popularity in Russia as the Mayor of Moscow allowed him to be elected the President of Russia in 1991 despite the objection of General Secretary Gorbachev.¹¹ After the signing of the Belavezha Accords on 6th December 1991, Boris Yeltsin became the President of the Russian Federation as the USSR ceased to exist.¹² An analysis of Boris Yeltsin’s term as President by the Wilson Centre states that, “Following the disintegration of the USSR, continued economic restructuring became one of

5 Knight and Ruble, “The Two Worlds of Vladimir Putin.”

6 *ibid*

7 Hill and Gaddy, “Who is Mr. Putin?”

8 *ibid*

9 *ibid*

10 *ibid*

11 “The rise of Yeltsin and the foundation of post-Soviet Russia.”

12 “The Belavezha Accords Signed.”

Yeltsin's main priorities with his government overseeing a massive privatization of state-run enterprises.”¹³

Boris Yeltsin was succeeded by Vladimir Putin on New Year’s Eve 1999.¹⁴ As aforementioned, Mr. Putin joined the Yeltsin administration in 1996 as part of the Property Management Directorate. In 1997, he became a deputy to Valentin Yumashev, Boris Yeltsin’s Chief of Staff.¹⁵ He rose through the ranks of the Kremlin in his time under Yumashev. When Boris Yeltsin’s health was failing, Vladimir Putin was a strong option in the race to succeed him. In August 1999, President Yeltsin’s choice was clear as he appointed Vladimir Putin as the Prime Minister of Russia.¹⁶ After his resignation on 31st December 1999, Vladimir Putin became the acting President of the Russian Federation. He would then go on to win the presidential elections on March 26, 2000, with 53 percent of the total votes.¹⁷

President Putin’s first years in office are characterised by his “rose garden” strategy.¹⁸ This means that the leader takes all credit, merited or not, to protect and promote his/her popularity and reputation. He did the same for economic growth in Russia in his first year as President.¹⁹ One of his few decisive moves in this period was to continue and increase Russian state intervention to suppress the Chechen separatist movement.²⁰ Despite his cautious approach to governance in his first few years, President Putin showed his effectiveness in the executive office. After the July 2002 session of the State Duma - the lower house of the Russian Parliament - President Putin signed seventy-seven out of hundred bills into law on various substantial areas of policy, from taxation to military reform.²¹ He would tighten his grip on the Russian polity as he spent more time in the top office. Vladimir Putin won the elections again in 2004 with 71 percent of the total vote.²²

13 “Yeltsin, Boris 1931-2007.”

14 Rosenberg, “The man who helped make ex-KGB officer Vladimir Putin a president.”

15 *ibid*

16 *ibid*

17 “Report on the Russian Presidential Elections March 2000.”

18 Nichols, “Putin’s First Two Years: Democracy or Authoritarianism?”

19 *ibid*

20 *ibid*

21 *ibid*

22 “Presidential Election, 14 March 2004.”

His second term in office would come to an end in 2008. Constitutionally, he couldn't run for a third consecutive term. In this period, Dmitry Medvedev became president. Ryabov describes this period in Russia as the age of "tandemocracy."²³ This implies that while Dmitry Medvedev was the head of state of the Russian Federation, the effective power was in the hands of Vladimir Putin, whom he had appointed as Prime Minister during his tenure. This was possible as "Medvedev became the head of state with Putin's blessing and active support."²⁴ Such a dynamic allowed Mr Putin to maintain control over Russia's most important ministries, such as those of power and external affairs, without making any drastic changes to its constitution. In November 2008, however, one change was made to the constitution under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. Article 81 of the constitution was amended to extend the presidential term from four years to six years.²⁵ This too was done with the benison of Vladimir Putin.

In 2012, the presidential elections came to Russia in the backdrop of massive public protests against the recent State Duma elections, accusing the elections of being fraudulent. Some of the protestors also called for the departure of Vladimir Putin from power.²⁶ His campaign in 2012, like his previous ones, propounded the messages of a return to the chaos of the 1990s without him.²⁷ However, one different and unprecedented approach he took was explaining his programs and policies to the public.²⁸ President Putin contested and won elections again in 2018, this time with 76.7 percent of the vote.²⁹ This election victory came in the background of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its alleged poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, United Kingdom (UK).³⁰ Today, President Vladimir Putin maintains an impressive hold over the country and has been Russia's president for 12 consecutive years. His most recent interaction with the electoral system was this year, when he won the presidency for a historic third consecutive term. We explore the structure of the government he controls, the way the elections are administered, and the electoral competition in Russia in the following sections of this brief.

23 Ryabov, "Tandemocracy in Today's Russia."

24 *ibid*

25 Roudik, "Russia: Constitutional Amendments Enter into Force."

26 Deloy, "Vladimir Putin wins back the presidency of the Federation of Russia."

27 *ibid*

28 *ibid*

29 Roth, "Vladimir Putin secures record win in Russian presidential election."

30 *ibid*

The Structure of the Russian Government

The Russian government follows a federal system of administration with the constitutional separation of powers among its legislative, executive, and judicial branches and fosters a bicameral legislature. The State Duma, or the Lower House of the Parliament (also known as the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation), consists of 450 popularly elected members.³¹ Its members are elected to 5-year terms (changed from 4 years after the 2008 constitutional amendments). According to its official website, some of the functions of the Russian State Duma are: “Its main tasks are adoption of federal constitutional and federal laws, control over the activity of the Russian Government, appointment and dismissal of heads of the Central Bank, Accounts Chamber and High Commissioner on Human Rights, declaration of amnesty, and issues of international parliamentary cooperation.”³²

The Upper House of the Russian Federal Assembly is called the Federation Council. According to its official website, “It is composed of two representatives from every constituent entity of the Russian Federation with one representing the legislative (representative) authority and the other the executive authority; the former President of the Russian Federation whose term in office has expired or who resigns before that; and no more than 30 representatives of the Russian Federation appointed by the President of the Russian Federation.”³³

The President of the Russian Federation is the most powerful office in the country. He is the Head of State of the Russian Federation. The President represents the Russian Federation both in international relations and within the country. According to Chapter 4 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, some of the powers of the President include appointing the Chairman of the Government (Prime Minister) of the Russian Federation, appointing Deputy Chairman (deputy Prime Ministers) of the Russian Federation, approving the military doctrine of the Russian Federation, and appointing and recalling diplomats of the Russian Federation.³⁴ Overall, the

31 “Status and powers, composition and Regulations of the State Duma.”

32 *ibid*

33 “Procedure of Establishing the Federation Council.”

34 “The President of the Russian Federation.”

Russian President is the most powerful person in the country; his powers also influence the legislative and judiciary of Russia.

The Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, also known as the Chairman of the Government, is appointed by the Russian President. He looks after the day-to-day administration of the Russian Government and is aided by Deputy Prime Ministers (Deputy Chairmen of the Government) as his cabinet in the same. According to the archives of the official site of the 2008-2012 Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, the role of the Prime Minister encompasses the following: “The Prime Minister,

- Represents the Russian government in Russia and abroad;
- Determines the operating priorities of the government and organises its work in accordance with the Constitution, federal constitutional laws, federal laws, and presidential decrees;
- Chairs meetings of the government, where he has the decisive vote;
- Signs the acts of the Russian government;
- Submits to the President proposals on the structure of the federal bodies of executive authority, appointment and dismissal of his deputies and federal ministers, and their punishment and rewards;
- Distributes duties among government members.”³⁵

The State Duma, the Federation Council, the Prime Minister, and the President of the Russian Federation are the four most powerful state institutions in Russia. The President supersedes all of them in practice, as he is the supreme authority in the state.

Elections in Russia

To understand the relationship between President Putin and the elections he has contested and won, it is essential to understand how the Russian elections are conducted, who administers them, and how the population participates in them. This can be done by analysing the reports of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s (OSCE) Election Observation Mission

³⁵ “Status and Responsibility.”

(EOM) reports for the Russian Elections. These reports have been curated for every presidential election in Russia since 1996, and for the purpose of this brief, the latest report from the 2018 Russian Presidential Elections is analysed.

Presidential Elections in the Russian Federation are conducted by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (CEC).³⁶ The Russian Presidential Elections of 2018 saw eight candidates contest for the top office. Out of these, the incumbent President Vladimir Putin was contesting for his second consecutive and fourth overall presidential term.³⁷ At this time, six political parties were represented in the State Duma, and four of them, including United Russia (ER), the party that enjoys a 343-seat majority in the State Duma, endorsed President Putin publicly.³⁸ The CEC reported that there were 109,008,428 registered voters for the 2018 presidential elections.³⁹ The 2018 campaigning narratives focused on issues of the economy, corruption, and Russia's position in the international order.⁴⁰ The 2018 campaigning period was characterised by mass detentions, confiscation of materials, and other restrictive measures adopted to deal with the supporters of Alexei Navalny, an activist who had been denied his candidacy and called for the boycott of the elections as he questioned their legitimacy.⁴¹ According to the same OSCE document, "The campaign was marked by a lack of genuine competition among contestants. Most candidates stated publicly that they expected the incumbent to emerge a winner, and admitted participating in order to promote their political platform or draw national attention to a particular issue. The incumbent did not present an election programme, and limited his personal engagement in the campaign to one rally in Moscow. However, he travelled throughout the country in his official capacity as president, enjoying unparalleled visibility and opportunities to address the electorate. On 1 March, the President delivered an annual address to parliament, that was televised and widely discussed in the media, and in which he outlined policy goals for the future."⁴²

36 "Presidential Elections 18th March 2018."

37 *ibid*

38 *ibid*

39 *ibid*

40 *ibid*

41 *ibid*

42 *ibid*

As an addition to the election system is the complaint redressal mechanism of the Russian electoral process, which is complicated and lacks transparency. A complaint filed parallelly with the Election Commission and a Judicial Court is put on hold by an Election Commission until the court makes its judgement on the same.⁴³ Furthermore, most of the complaints recorded during the election period were related to the misuse of administrative resources and the distribution of anonymous pamphlets calling for the boycott of the elections.⁴⁴ The former was not dealt with by the Election Commissions, as they declared that it was “beyond their competence” and redirected all such complaints to the relevant state authorities.⁴⁵ The latter were declared “illegal campaigning material” by some lower election commissions but this decision was overturned by a court ruling that rules that “citizens are neither obliged to provide copies of their campaign materials to the CEC or SECs nor to indicate data pertaining to an electoral fund.”⁴⁶ The EOM also observed a lack of transparency in the way the votes were counted and tabulated, the way complaints were addressed, and the manner in which the campaign finance was disclosed.⁴⁷ Despite no major campaigning effort and mass opposition to his candidacy, Vladimir Putin, the incumbent won the elections with a 76.7% mandate.

Politics of Russia

Five political parties compose the Russian State Duma today: United Russia (ER), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), A Just Russia–Patriots–For Truth, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and New People.⁴⁸ Out of these, ER forms the majority with 324 seats in the 450-seat State Duma.⁴⁹ The European Parliament describes the Russian opposition as, “the landscape of opposition in Russia is marked by two types of opposition, on the one hand political

43 ibid

44 ibid

45 ibid

46 ibid

47 ibid

48 “Factions.”

49 ibid

parties that are accepted by the regime and integrated to the electoral system, and on the other hand some isolated movements which are kept out of the electoral process.”⁵⁰

In the context of this analysis, the Russian opposition can be understood in two broad umbrellas, the systemic (described as the former above) and the non-systemic (the latter from the above). The systemic opposition in the Russian Federation can be understood using the cases of the CPRF and the New People Party, while the non-systemic opposition can be conceived through the case of the party “Russia of the Future” and its leader, Alexei Navalny.

United Russia (ER)

To begin with the ruling party of the State Duma, United Russia, Konitzer and Wegren describe ER as the “party of power.”⁵¹ United Russia began as “Unity,” a political party that was founded by Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky with the support of the Kremlin in 1999.⁵² It was engineered to become a pro-presidential party of power, which would allow the President and the Kremlin to enforce their interests across Russia’s eighty-nine regions without sharing their power or associating themselves politically with one party. United Russia rose to power using three key strategies: displaying itself as a party of “youthful, energetic, professional leadership,” placing major emphasis on the territorial integrity of Russia and its national greatness, and significantly associating itself firmly with Vladimir Putin.⁵³ Since the State Duma elections of 1999, ER has been the dominant political party in the Russian legislature and has cultivated its reputation as a pro-presidential party of power.

The Systemic Opposition

The representation of systemic opposition in Russia is seen in the State Duma. These political parties are propped up and supported indirectly by the Kremlin to display a façade of democratic choice in the electoral process. The leaders of these parties also focus on reforming one or two

50 “The political opposition in Russia.”

51 Konitzer and Wegren, “Federalism and Political Decentralisation in the Russian Federation: United Russia as the Party of Power.”

52 *ibid*

53 *ibid*

areas of governance rather than reforming the entire administration or even overthrowing it like their opposites in the non-systemic opposition camp do. Some examples of systemic opposition in Russia are the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which is the second largest party in the State Duma with 57 seats, and the New People Party, which was founded during the 2020 State Duma elections reportedly with support from the Kremlin and secured 15 seats in the State Duma.⁵⁴ The parties and candidates of the systemic opposition are also controlled by the central authority. Their candidate nominations and their party funding are all subject to the approval of the Kremlin. In summary, the systemic opposition in Russia exists merely to give the impression of a range of options to the electorate, where multiple political parties defend different interests and public policies.

The Non-Systemic Opposition

The non-systemic opposition in Russia opposes not only the policies of the government but also the regime as a whole. It has existed since President Putin took power in 2000 but came to the forefront of Russian politics with the 2012 anti-Putin protests, wherein about 120,000 people marched the streets of Moscow against the return of Vladimir Putin as President.⁵⁵

Alexei Navalny and Russian Politics

One of the most successful movements of the non-systemic Russian opposition was led by Alexei Navalny, an anti-corruption blogger turned activist. He became a member of the liberal YABLOKO party in 2000.⁵⁶ He was expelled from the party in 2007 for being overly nationalistic.⁵⁷ Navalny was a leader in the 2011 mass protests that took place across Russia after United Russia won the parliamentary elections with a massive mandate despite huge public opposition.⁵⁸ He was arrested and sentenced to fifteen days in jail for his role in the same. In 2013, Navalny won 27 percent of the vote in the Moscow mayoral race despite cases of embezzlement

54 Eckel, "What Do The Regional Election Results Tell Us About Putin's Russia?"

55 Parfitt, "Anti-Putin protestors march through Moscow."

56 Abovyan, "Timeline of Alexei Navalny's life and activism."

57 ibid

58 ibid

and fraud on him. He was convicted of these charges, but his sentences were suspended by the court.⁵⁹ Alexei Navalny wanted to run for president in the 2018 elections, but his candidacy was rejected because of his convictions. The mass movements that Alexei Navalny led, and his popular reputation made him a target of the Kremlin. In 2020, he was poisoned with a Soviet-era nerve agent and had to be flown to Germany to undergo treatment.⁶⁰ Upon his return to Russia in 2021, Alexei Navalny was arrested as his travel abroad violated the terms of his suspended convictions. Mr. Navalny would spend the rest of his life in prison until his death on 1st March 2024.⁶¹ Navalny's activism and his political movement, "Russia of the Future," are his legacy today; his work to publish exposés against the Putin regime, point out corruption in state companies like Gazprom, and lead mass protests against the Russian government have left a significant mark on the politics of the Russian Federation.

The 2024 Russian Presidential Elections

The Russian presidential elections of 2024 were underscored by two crucial domestic events. The first was Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. The second was the death of Alexei Navalny, the most powerful opposition leader in Russia in the past two decades. The incumbent, President Putin, was contesting for his third consecutive 6-year term. He had already been President of Russia for 20 years previously and the most powerful man in the country for 24 years. He received a record 87% mandate in the 2024 elections, the largest mandate in the history of the Russian Federation since the disintegration of the USSR.⁶² Al Jazeera describes Mr Putin's victory as "Putin's victory was never in doubt as his critics are mostly in jail, in exile or dead, while public criticism of his leadership has been stifled."⁶³

The Russian elections of 2024 received widespread criticism from all around the world. The 2024 presidential elections were also the first time since 1996 in which the OSCE was not invited to observe the electoral process. The election result, while not unexpected, was controversial because

59 ibid

60 ibid

61 ibid

62 Faulconbridge and Osborn, "Putin wins Russia election in landslide with no serious competition."

63 Jazeera, "Russia's Putin hails victory in election criticised as illegitimate."

of the margin with which President Putin won the office. Legally, he could run for office again too, as he had signed into force constitutional amendments in 2021, allowing him to run for office again in 2024 and 2030.⁶⁴

Way Forward

President Putin has solidified his hold on power in Russia till at least 2036. His greatest opponent today is his age. Mr Putin is already 71 years old. By the end of his 6-year term starting in 2024, he will be 77. If he finishes this term, Vladimir Putin will become Russia's longest serving leader in the last 200 years, overtaking Stalin. Today, he is tasked with the war in Ukraine that does not seem to come to an end. He must ensure that Russia's position in the international order is not compromised as the country seeks to end the war while also navigating an economic crisis and international economic sanctions. It is essential that Russia maintain its close ties with friends like India and China while also trying to cultivate new ties with others.

Conclusion

The relationship between President Putin and elections is a complicated one. It seems that he respects democracy and its values insofar as they align with his interests and goals. His regime is one that is totalitarian when it comes to electoral processes. It strives to control everything from the administration of the election to the parties that contest it. This procedure has worked for Vladimir Putin and his associates; it has allowed them to remain in power for more than two decades in Russia and has also informed their decision-making on the international stage. Elections are key in a democracy. Vladimir Putin, however, seems to be the most essential factor in electoral success in Russia.

64 RadioLiberty, "Putin Signs Constitutional Changes That Allow Him To Rule Until 2036."

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