



# HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

May 22, 2018

## IN BRIEF

### Helsinki Commission Observation of Russia's Presidential Elections

Presidential elections were held in the Russian Federation on March 18, 2018; incumbent Vladimir Putin took about 76 percent of the votes cast among eight candidates, with a voter turnout topping 67 percent. These lopsided results were unsurprising in a country where the current regime has steadily and systematically decimated the democratic norms that gained a foothold in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, international observers traveled to Russia under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to provide an authoritative assessment of electoral conditions and to encourage Russia to adhere to its OSCE commitments. The Russian Federation, along with the 56 other OSCE participating States, has committed to hold free and fair elections, as well as to invite international observers. An OSCE presence also indicated an ongoing willingness to support democratic development by engaging not just the government but all players in Russian society. Despite a variety of official efforts to suppress critics and marginalize opposition, independent and democratic forces remain active in Russia.

Based on an December 21, 2017, recommendation to deploy a comprehensive OSCE observation mission for the Russian election, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a Moscow-based core team of 13 experts supplemented by 60 long-term observers deployed throughout the country.

On election day, 481 observers from 44 countries visited more than 2,000 polling stations. The elec-

tion day deployment included a 101-member delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), including two Helsinki Commission staffers who were the only U.S. government officials to observe the elections. They observed in Istra and other towns northwest of Moscow and in Yekaterinburg, Russia's fourth-largest city.

#### Election Strategy

Over the last decade, through increasingly severe restrictions on the media, civil society, and foreign funding in Russia, along with growing harassment and intimidation of activists, Vladimir Putin and his cronies have concentrated their political power, enriching themselves as they ride roughshod over the few trappings of democracy rule of law that remain. For example, in 2012 and 2015, the Russian parliament (State Duma) passed measures that require domestic groups receiving foreign funding to register as foreign agents and allow foreign organizations to be declared undesirable. A so-called "anti-terrorist" law passed in 2016 allows authorities to act in contravention of civil rights.

After being tapped by Boris Yeltsin as his successor in 1999, Putin served the maximum of two four-year terms before stepping down to become Prime Minister in 2008. In 2008, legislation extended subsequent presidential terms to six years, but failed to clarify whether the two-term limit only applied to consecutive terms in office.

In 2012, Putin returned to the presidency for a third, non-consecutive term. His victory in 2018 would allow him to complete a second two-term

cycle. The country’s Supreme Court recently upheld Putin’s eligibility for re-election in the face of legal claims that the constitutional limit on his time in office had already been exhausted.

Prior to the election, the regime and its supporters effectively eliminated all serious challengers to the president. The murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in 2015 was followed by more recent measures taken against lawyer and anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny. Russian election officials rejected Navalny’s eligibility as a presidential candidate based on an un-expunged criminal conviction, despite a European Court of Human Rights ruling that the conviction was arbitrary and unfair. Navalny responded both with protests and a call for a “voters’ strike,” or election boycott.<sup>1</sup> Five other aspirants were denied even the ability to seek a place on the ballot.

The Kremlin did tolerate several challengers who were perceived as unthreatening, perhaps to create the appearance of legitimacy according to some analysts. Sixteen candidates other than Putin sought a place on the ballot; seven were successful. Two succeeded based on their nomination by a political party represented in parliament, while five others found a place through signature collection. Only Putin registered as an independent candidate with no party support, despite his affiliation with the ruling United Russia party.

**The Campaign**

In addition to the incumbent Vladimir Putin, the candidates were:

- Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, nominated by the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (represented in the State Duma)

One of several welcomed improvements in the administration of Russian elections was a significantly lowered signature threshold to establish a candidacy, from two million to 300,000 for non-party candidates and 100,000 for candidates supported by unrepresented political parties.



This front-page photo appeared in an influential weekly on Saturday, March 17—the day before the election. No other candidate was shown or mentioned in this edition.

- Pavel Grudinin, nominated by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (represented in the State Duma)
- Ksenia Sobchak, nominated by the Civic Initiative
- Grigory Yavlinsky, nominated by the Russian United Democratic Party “Yabloko”
- Maksim Suraikin, nominated by the Communists of Russia
- Boris Titov, nominated by Party of Growth
- Sergei Baburin, nominated by the Russian All-People’s Union

Except for a few isolated theatrics, the campaign was among the least visible in almost three decades of Helsinki Commission election observation. The seven challengers clearly understood that they were certain to lose and were being permitted to compete

mostly to provide a veneer of legitimacy to Putin’s re-election. They put few of their own resources into posters or other public advertising seeking actual voter support, limiting their campaigns mostly to rallies, television “debates,” and social media.

None of the other candidates seriously challenged President Putin and his policies. In turn, Putin virtually ignored them, failing to join any of several televised presidential candidate debates. Instead, capitalizing on state control of the media, Putin dominated the scene with extensive and complimentary coverage of his official presidential activity. This included a televised address given less than three weeks before election day as a substitute for his annual address to parliament, in which he outlined his goals for his next term in office.

Although some of the candidates openly criticized Navalny’s call for an electoral boycott, his supporters continued to call for a “voters’ strike” during the pre-election period; they were generally not allowed to assemble and express their views. Instead, Russian authorities detained many protesters and confiscated their leaflets and other materials.

The closing days of the campaign coincided with the reports of the use of an extremely dangerous “Novichok” nerve agent in an assassination attempt on former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yuliya in the United Kingdom. While British officials laid responsibility at the feet of the Russian government, the Kremlin denied any responsibility. Patriotic chest-thumping among some public officials and news

### Why Would They Run?

Candidates did differ in their political platform, level of experience in Russian politics, and relationship with President Putin, but their greatest difference may have been in their motivation to participate in what all knew was a losing cause. Some, like the veteran populist Zhirinovskiy, may have seen victory as an improved showing over previous efforts, while others, like the longtime opposition leader Yavlinsky, may have genuinely wanted to provide at least some alternative points of view. Television personality and political newcomer Sobchak claimed she hoped to build her visibility and the experience needed to make inroads in the next parliamentary or local elections. Suraikin’s may have participated simply to play the role of a spoiler to Grudinin, the likely second-place finisher. Challengers likely wanted to promote their personal interests and ambitions through participation. The absence of an expectation of winning, however, nullified the competitive nature expected of multi-party elections.



“A Vote for President Is a Vote for the Future.”

reports likely helped to rally support for Vladimir Putin as the campaign came to an end.

To ensure an unquestionable victory, a large voter turnout was essential, particularly in the face of Navalny's boycott call. The government undertook active, and in some cases coercive, efforts to ensure voter turnout would be high. The most noticeable effort was a pervasive "get-out-the-vote" campaign with the slogan, "A vote for president is a vote for the future." In addition, to encourage participation, voters for the first time could choose to vote in a place other than that determined by their residence. More than 5.6 million voters, out of a total of nearly 109 million, took advantage of this new opportunity. Local initiatives to boost turnout further included encouraging voters to bring their children to the polling stations.

### **Election Day**

The conduct of election officials in preparing the elections and administering the balloting and count on election day was relatively professional, at least in the major cities where international observers were present. With the campaign and overall context for Russia's presidential elections falling short of the country's OSCE commitments, President Putin had less to fear from a well-conducted election day process.

The Central Election Commission, chaired by Ella Pamfilova who had previously worked on human rights and civil society issues, was significantly more open and engaging than in the past. OSCE long-term observers reported positively on activities at lower levels of election administration, although in some cases local officials pressured voters to participate.

Helsinki Commission staff experienced few problems on election day, and were well received even by polling committee chairs who seemed less than enthused about being subjected to international observation.

OSCE observers were able to ask the necessary questions and were never restricted in their position or movement within the polling station. They noted that most procedures were followed correctly, not



An electoral commission member tests his ballot scanner before polls open.

only during balloting but also in the counting of ballots, which was facilitated by ballot box scanners that automatically tabulated results. Ballot-scanning machines observed by Helsinki Commission staff seemed to have worked properly; if so, they provided quicker and perhaps more accurate running totals at least of voter turnout at those polling stations where they were used.

At times, voters lacked the privacy to vote secretly, and some open and group voting was observed near Moscow. While something to be corrected, such shortcomings did not indicate any intentional effort to intimidate or influence voters.

Aware that the OSCE was likely to be critical, Russian authorities invited an additional group of selected, pro-Kremlin foreign observers to Russia to provide a more positive perspective. Perhaps more importantly, they were also invited to observe in illegally occupied Crimea, the incorporation of which into the Federation exactly four years earlier

the OSCE and most of the international community have steadfastly refused to recognize.<sup>2</sup>

Domestic observers were present in virtually every polling station, most representing a candidate but some representing a civil society organization. “United Russia” had one observer at every one of the fourteen polling stations observed in Yekaterinburg; “Yabloko” was the only other party that had observers present in that city, and they functioned as genuine observers, using clickers to count each ballot scanned.

Civil society organizations could not simply observe on their own but had to be appointed by so-called civic chambers, providing some check on their activity and potentially compromising the independence of their activity. Groups like Golos were able to observe the elections legally by circumventing some of the formal restrictions on their activities.

Unlike international observers, who seek to spend time in a dozen or so polling stations within a given area, domestic observers mostly confined themselves to a single polling station and generally remained seated and passive in their observation. None of the domestic observers encountered by Commission staff reported any significant problems at the polling station where they were based.

However, there were reports of electoral fraud around the country, especially claims of ballot box stuffing. According to Golos, in some cases election officials responded by invalidating the results at those polling stations.<sup>3</sup>

Police were also present at every polling station visited but did not visibly interfere in the process. At least one person claiming to be a police officer was regularly present in one station near Moscow but was not in uniform.

<b>Election Results</b> (Central Election Commission, <a href="http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru">www.vybory.izbirkom.ru</a> )		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich	56,430,712	76.69%
Grudinin, Pavel Nikolaevich	8,659,206	11.77%
Zhirinovskiy, Vladimir Volfovich	4,154,985	5.65%
Sobchak, Ksenia Anatolyevna	1,238,031	1.68%
Yavlinsky, Grigory Alekseevich	769,644	1.05%
Titov, Boris Yuryevich	556,801	0.76%
Suraykin, Maxim Alexandrovich	499,342	0.68%
Baburin, Sergey Nikolaevich	479,013	0.65%

### **Post-Election Assessments**

An OSCE election observation mission is a combined effort of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the ODIHR. Michael George Link, a Member of the German Bundestag, served as Special Coordinator, while Jan Petersen, a retired Norwegian ambassador, led the ODIHR’s core team and long-term observation, and Marietta Tidei, an Italian parliamentarian, led the assembly’s short-term effort. In addition to serving on the German Delegation to the OSCE PA, Link was previously the Director of the ODIHR and is fluent in Russian.

The mission’s opening paragraph in its statement of preliminary findings and conclusions, released on March 19, noted that the context in which the presidential elections were held was sufficiently restrictive and unfair to a point where a relatively freer vote posed virtually no risk to the desired outcome but, instead, allowed the winner to claim legitimacy:

*The 18 March presidential election took place in an overly controlled legal and political environment marked by continued pressure on critical voices, while the Central Election Commission (CEC) administered the election efficiently and openly. After intense efforts to promote turnout, citizens voted in significant numbers, yet restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression, as well as on candidate registration, have limited the space for political engagement and resulted in a lack of genuine competition. While candidates could generally campaign freely, the extensive and uncritical coverage of the incumbent as president in most media resulted in an uneven playing field. Overall, election day was conducted in an orderly manner despite shortcomings related to vote secrecy and transparency of counting.*

In the press conference, Link said, “Choice without real competition, as we have seen here, is not real choice... [W]here the legal framework restricts many fundamental freedoms and the outcome is not in doubt, elections almost lose their purpose-empowering people to choose their leaders.”

Thanking voters for their support in a televised address, President Putin acknowledged, “The essence of competition is criticism of the incumbent authorities,” but he stressed a need for unity in support of national interests and, in an apparent criticism of opposition leaders, claimed there to be “no place for irresponsible populism.”<sup>4</sup>

Upon the formal announcement of his victory on April 3, Putin called the contest “the most transparent and cleanest election in the history of our country.”<sup>5</sup>

In Vienna, the U.S. Mission to the OSCE commended the work of the OSCE observers and urged Russian authorities “to address the shortcomings reported by the OSCE observation mission, as they are contrary to Russia’s OSCE commitments and international obligations.”

The mission also repeated its position that “the United States does not recognize the Russian election staged in Crimea on March 18.”<sup>6</sup>

In the coming months, the ODIHR will prepare a full report on the elections, including specific recommendations for follow-up action to improve performance. While continued engagement with Russian election officials hopefully will improve technical aspects of electoral performance, ultimately the OSCE and its participating States will need to persevere in their efforts to encourage Russian authorities to implement the entirety of their Human Dimension commitments relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic development, and the rule of law.

### **Conclusion**

The 2018 election served only to confirm Vladimir Putin as the unchallenged leader of Russia, allowing him to remain in power for a quarter of a century—second only to Stalin since the fall of Imperial Russia—and enabling him to take the necessary steps to preserve the position of the existing political elite when his term ends in 2024.

Thanks to his success in bringing Russia out of the political and economic chaos of the 1990s, Putin may have been genuinely popular among a large segment of the population. However, popularity is not necessarily enough to guarantee re-election under truly competitive conditions.

Allowing a greater diversity of viewpoints to be advocated and permitting political opponents to have greater opportunity to make their case to the public would enhance legitimacy, but also increase accountability, which may be the Kremlin’s greatest fear. Even victory after a second round, if no candidate achieved an absolute first-round majority, would likely have been viewed as a sign of weakness.

As noted in OSCE Parliamentary Assembly resolutions, improvements in Russia’s performance would also affect the Kremlin’s behavior toward its neighbors, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. Given the comprehensive definition of security that serves as the basis for the OSCE and its work, the Russian Federation should continue to be pressed to implement its Human Dimension commitments to benefit security and cooperation throughout Europe and the OSCE region.

---

*Unless otherwise noted, all facts and figures in this article come from the OSCE International Election Observation Mission’s “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” March 19, 2018, and from briefing sessions for observers conducted in Moscow prior to election day.*

## **About the Helsinki Commission**

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

Learn more at [www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov).

### **Report Contributors**

- Robert Hand, Senior Policy Advisor, U.S. Helsinki Commission
- Scott Rauland, Senior State Department Advisor, U.S. Helsinki Commission

### **Editor**

- Stacy Hope, Communications Director, U.S. Helsinki Commission

---

<sup>1</sup> Anton Troianovski, “Boycott or Vote? Putin Foes Split as Russian Election Nears,” Washington Post, January 26, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “How Biased ‘Observers’ Tried to Legitimize Putin’s Election in Crimea,” European Platform for Democratic Elections, April 4, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Golos, “Preliminary Statement on Results of Public Monitoring of the Presidential Elections,” March 28, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Basking in Big Official Win, Putin Urges Unity, Blasts ‘Irresponsible Populism,’” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 23, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> “Putin Claims His Election Win Was ‘Cleanest’ in Russian History,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 3, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Harry R. Kamian, Charge d’Affaires, Statement to the OSCE Permanent Council, March 22, 2018.