

## Putin for the fourth time. No vision, no hope

Maria Domańska

---

On 6 December Vladimir Putin announced that he will run in the presidential election to be held on 18 March 2018. The absence of any change in the office of Russia's president is rooted in the logic of a personalised system of governance that has emerged in Russia. It is also a demonstration of the government's will to maintain the present course in domestic and foreign policy, one that is static and devoid of any scope for development. This is regardless of the fact that the government is struggling with increasingly serious economic and socio-political challenges. These mainly include economic stagnation, continuously decreasing real incomes, and tense relations with the West, all combined with the lack of a coherent, positive ideology to legitimise Putin's model. Against this backdrop, the election-related actions the government has taken to date are of a provisional and tactical nature: they focus on efforts to achieve a stabilisation of the socio-political situation and to eliminate possible threats to the ruling elite in the pre- and post-election period. At the same time, attempts are being made to make the electoral ritual more attractive, so as to boost turnout and thereby demonstrate a high approval rating for both the president and the model of governance he endorses.

---

### Putin for the fourth time – an intrigue without an intrigue

Over the last couple of months, an artificially created tension had been mounting around the question of Putin seeking re-election. It was accompanied by short-lived gossip suggesting that the Kremlin may authorise another candidate (for example, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev) to run in the election. However, the logic of the system, Putin's position within this system, and his personal interests all clearly indicated that his participation in the election was a sure thing from the start<sup>1</sup>. The President had long

been reluctant to announce his participation in the election (the exact date of the election was announced on 15 December, which also marks the official launch of the election campaign). Making this situation appear like some palace intrigue probably served the purpose of artificially boosting the attractiveness of the election process, stoking a feeling of uncertainty in order to 'discipline' the elite and evoking concerns among a segment of society that the domestic situation may become destabilised should Putin leave office next year.

The candidacy was announced sooner than expected – not during the annual presidential press conference on 14 December but during Putin's visit to Nizhny Novgorod. It seems that the long-awaited decision was brought forward to divert public attention from the giant blot on Russia's image suffered in connection with the decision by the Executive Board of the In-

---

<sup>1</sup> For Putin, the constitution seems to be the only limitation. However, the present constitutional laws allow him to hold the office of president for another term. According to the basic law, one person must not hold the office of president for more than two consecutive terms (this means that after the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev in 2008–2012, the years 2018–2024 will be Putin's second consecutive term in office).

ternational Olympic Committee of 5 December 2017. The Russian Federation was banned from participation in the Winter Olympics in Pyongchang in 2018. The Board authorised Russian athletes to compete in the games under the Olympic flag only<sup>2</sup>. The choice of audience for Putin's announcement – workers employed in the GAZ automotive plant, who pleaded with Putin to confirm his candidacy (the entire situation looked like a stage-managed performance) – seems to indicate that the president is positioning himself as a representative of the 'common folk' and wishes to appeal to traditionally-minded voters<sup>3</sup>.

**Paradoxically, the key role that the presidential election plays in the Russian system is not compromised by the fact that it is a sham election.**

There are several reasons behind the fact that Putin is running for re-election. Firstly, his decision stems from the logic of a personalised system of governance that has emerged in Russia. It is evident that the Kremlin strives to maintain its present course in domestic and foreign politics, one that is inert and lacking any prospects for development yet still enables the ruling elite to expand their private wealth. In this situation, Putin, who over the last decade or so has been positioned as an unrivalled leader having a relatively high approval rating, is the only candidate capable of legitimising a system that is confronting increasingly serious socio-political

<sup>2</sup> The decision came as a result of the doping scandal surrounding the Olympic Games in Sochi: it has been proved that representatives of the Russian government were at that time involved in a systemic violation of anti-doping procedures (as a consequence a number of Russian athletes have been stripped of their Olympic medals and only those athletes who have been cleared off doping charges will be allowed to compete in the Olympic Games in South Korea).

<sup>3</sup> A few hours earlier, at a meeting with young people, Putin only enigmatically announced that he would make the decision shortly.

challenges (more on this later on). Secondly, in the eyes of the elite he continues to hold the status of the sole arbiter able to guarantee a relative balance between various influence groups. Thirdly, his own interests and philosophy of governance should be taken into account. At present, mutual distrust common among the Russian ruling elite, combined with the fact that Putin needs a safety guarantee for the wealth he has amassed and a personal security guarantee for himself, rule out the option of him passing the helm of the state to a successor.

The official nomination of the Kremlin's candidate in the upcoming presidential election is important not so much in the context of the artificially stoked 'intrigues' now being resolved, but in the context of two other issues. The first one is the fundamental importance of this election for the Russian political system, including the potential change to the state's most prominent office. The other issue is the actual stance the state authorities take on major challenges that serve as the backdrop for the upcoming election.

### The role of the presidential election

Due to the president's central position in the system, the presidential election is of paramount importance for the stability of the Russian model of governance. The president's position results from his broad competences defined in the constitution. However, Vladimir Putin's personal characteristics are also of major importance<sup>4</sup>. Since 2000, he has managed to solidify his image as an arbiter overseeing the appropriate balance between various interest groups in the elite, and – especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – as the leader of

<sup>4</sup> This was evident during Dmitri Medvedev's presidency: back then Putin managed to maintain the position of the actual decision maker and Medvedev was forced to pass the office of the head of state to him in the subsequent term.

the nation legitimising the authoritarian model in the eyes of society, due to his charisma and aggressive foreign policy.

**Firstly, the election is a unique test of the effectiveness and loyalty of the ruling elite and the bureaucratic apparatus. Secondly, it gives the outward appearance of a dialogue between government and society.**

Paradoxically, the key role of the presidential election in the system is not compromised by the fact that, as with all other elections held in Russia, it is in actuality a sham election. Its course and result are not so much a demonstration of the voters' will but rather the result of decisions made by the ruling group and the mobilisation of an administrative apparatus. The latter operates in a situation where the opposition is marginalised, the Kremlin fully dominates the media, and civil freedoms (such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly) are regularly being violated. Due to the fact that society has been stripped of its political subjectivity, the electoral campaign and the voting process itself resemble a plebiscite and are conducted within a unique political vacuum (with no real, fair competition between the candidates and no conflicting interests among specific social groups). Nonetheless, on each such occasion the authorities strive to conceal this vacuum with pseudo-democratic procedures. It is their priority to legitimise the electoral illusion (at both a domestic and international level) and at the same time create the impression that there is no alternative to the candidate backed by the Kremlin – no-one can threaten his political position, no-one can govern the country better than he does, and no-one else can guarantee peace and stability. Control of the electoral process, of the course of the campaign and of the surrounding social mood ensures the security and wealth of the ruling elite.

The fact that power has been focused around the president results in a situation in which problems with efficient organisation of the electoral campaign, and with achieving the desired result, may destabilise the system as a whole, including the balance of influence among the elite and the image of the government as seen by society.

In these circumstances, the presidential election in Russia has two main roles to play. Firstly, it is a unique test of the effectiveness and loyalty of the ruling elite and the bureaucratic apparatus. Mobilising the entire state apparatus to achieve the desired electoral result makes it possible to ascertain its effectiveness and discern the weakest links and dysfunctions. These may involve the inability to avoid electoral scandals (for instance, a vote-rigging exercise that is too blatant) which undermine the legitimacy of the process as a whole. The lack of consolidation and the presence of conflicts within the elites at regional and local levels may not only compromise the efficiency of the efforts focused on the election result but also tarnish the image of state authorities, and thereby, the image of the candidate backed by them – especially if this is accompanied by unauthorised criticism of the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy, offered by representatives of the state apparatus. The government's inability to guarantee social stability in the pre- and post-election period or to neutralise the mood of dissatisfaction and protest may also pose a major threat.

Secondly, the election provides a veneer of dialogue between the government and society, intended to legitimise the authoritarian model of governance. Electoral promises made by the government-backed candidate serve the purpose of pretending that the state cares for its citizens and that society and the ruling elite have common interests. Moreover, the election is an opportunity to fathom the true feelings of the general public in a system in which the standard channels of communication between society and government are largely limited.

The electoral campaign enables a controlled emergence of 'constructive' (non-political) grassroots social demands. Some of them may later be included in a set of electoral promises which the Kremlin-backed candidate makes. To counter the anti-system, uncontrolled criticism, two types of measures are being deployed: the authors of such criticism are repressed and some of the demands voiced by the real opposition are co-opted by the Kremlin's candidate or by the 'intra-system' opposition approved by the Kremlin, which makes it possible to dilute the potential for protest<sup>5</sup>.

### The context of the presidential election

The present stage of development of Putin's model of governance is characterised by stagnation and inertia in the economic, political and ideological spheres (it is frequently compared with the Brezhnev era of 'blossoming decay'). Efforts to mobilise public support for the government focus on negative issues: strengthening the anti-Western ideology<sup>6</sup>, with its underlying concepts of seeking an enemy and of Russia being a fortress under siege, re-Sovietisation of the policy of memory and consenting to a rehabilitation of profoundly autocratic models of governance<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> In this way a rift in opposition groups is being created alongside a division of these groups into groups enjoying different levels of 'privileged treatment' from the government, and a portion of the opposition (the counter-elites) is being included in the state establishment.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the regime's legitimisation resulting from anti-Western foreign policy see M. Domańska, 'Conflict-dependent Russia. The domestic determinants of the Kremlin's anti-Western policy', *OSW Point of View*, 6 November 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2017-11-06/conflict-dependent-russia-domestic-determinants-kremlins-anti>

<sup>7</sup> K. Chawryło, 'Stalin in contemporary Russia: admired and required', *OSW Commentary*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-10-31/stalin-contemporary-russia-admired-and-required>; M. Domańska, 'Russia marks the 70th anniversary of the victory over Nazism: What significance does it have in an epoch of global confrontation?', *OSW Commentary*, 20 May 2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-05-20/russia-marks-70th-anniversary-victory-over-nazism-what>

For the Kremlin, the key challenge in the pre- and post-election period is the rising problem concerning legitimisation of the authoritarian model of governance. The main source of this problem is the prospect that the current economic stagnation, which is adversely affecting the financial situation of Russian citizens<sup>8</sup>, may continue in the upcoming years.

### The present stage of the development of Putin's model of governance resembles the Brezhnev era of 'blossoming decay'.

At the same time, the strong impetus that arose from the nation-wide euphoria following Russia's annexation of Crimea has been exhausted. Furthermore, the cost of the geopolitical confrontation with the West is becoming increasingly evident, both for society and for businesspeople and members of the political elite<sup>9</sup>. So far, the government has not announced any comprehensive economic reform programme and it should be assumed that even if such a programme was announced, it would remain mere empty platitudes due to the dysfunctional model of economic governance and its extreme politicisation<sup>10</sup>, as well as the fear of political consequences arising from the reforms.

<sup>8</sup> Between November 2014 and the autumn of 2017 real incomes declined by almost 20%. [https://lenta.ru/news/2017/10/18/padenie\\_dohodov/](https://lenta.ru/news/2017/10/18/padenie_dohodov/)

<sup>9</sup> The Russian political and business elite seems to be alarmed by both the announced tightening of the US sanctions against Russia and the detention in November 2017 in France of Russian oligarch Suleiman Kerimov (on money laundering and tax evasion charges).

<sup>10</sup> For details see M. Domańska, 'Crisis in Russia. The degradation of the model of economic governance', *OSW Studies*, 3 March 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2017-03-03/crisis-russia-degradation-model-economic-governance>. The diagnosis is not changed by the fact that the government is regularly expressing its readiness to carry out vaguely defined reforms – Alexei Kudrin remains the symbol of these reforms, on request from the Kremlin he prepared a reform programme whose comprehensive implementation is rather unlikely.

The government limits itself to solving isolated problems and addressing the most burning issues immediately prior to the election, including by offering one-time cash injections. This indicates that the government's attitude is focused not so much on devising a strategy to combat challenges as on maintaining the 'provisional political management' by tactical handling of selected realms in which the state operates.

It seems that the Kremlin is seriously concerned by rising social dissatisfaction<sup>11</sup>, in particular the successful mobilisation of the potential for protest by the oppositionist figure, Alexei Navalny, mainly centred around the slogan of combating corruption, which is endemic in Russia and has spread to the highest levels of government. So far, neither the size nor the dynamic of the protests organised by Navalny pose an immediate threat to the government.

**For the Kremlin, the key challenge is the mounting problem concerning the legitimacy of the authoritarian model of governance.**

This is due to Navalny's highly negative approval rating, the repressive measures taken against his supporters and Russian society's enduring atomisation. However, the elite is becoming increasingly aware that there are no adequate instruments to recognise the genuine, hidden potential for protest and the true approval rating of the government and of the president (polls are not a reliable tool for measuring this due to the high level of respondents' distrust of them). Local elections held in Moscow in September 2017 were an alarm signal for the Kremlin –

<sup>11</sup> Experts point to an increase in the protest activity in 2017 compared with 2016 (mainly regarding social issues) and although its scale remains insignificant, it is evident that its dynamic is unfavourable for the government. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/10/2017/59f7a4329a79476d-dc21a2df>; <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/07/11/2017/59fc780e9a794772d40d85d1>

the government's efforts to lower the turnout as much as possible did not prevent the democratic opposition from achieving a good result (by Russian standards)<sup>12</sup>.

## The government's strategy ahead of the election

The government's inability to cope with the main socio-economic challenges, and – in the long run – with political challenges, combined with the need to demonstrate the regime's stability determines the logic of its actions in the period ahead of the election. These actions have no overriding direction, they are more a provisional blend of repressive, as well as pseudo-liberalising and pro-social measures. The former ones are intended to eliminate or minimise the threat posed by opposition groups, the latter ones – to improve the government's image and shore up its legitimacy. In this context, the frequently emphasised dedication to fairness and transparency in the upcoming election is significant. The prime concern is maintaining domestic political stability in the pre- and post-election period – all the more so because the previous victory by Putin was accompanied by mass protests<sup>13</sup>.

The selection of candidates, which is *de facto* made by the Kremlin, is of key importance for the course and the outcome of the election. Alexei Navalny, who has been successfully mobilising the potential for protest since the spring of 2017<sup>14</sup>, has been eliminated from the

<sup>12</sup> For more see M. Domańska, The Kremlin's regional policy – a year of dismissing governors, OSW Commentary, 15 December 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-12-15/kremlins-regional-policy-a-year-dismissing-governors>

<sup>13</sup> The protests in late 2011 and early 2012 were triggered both by the rigged parliamentary elections and by Putin's decision to run in another presidential election following Medvedev's 'technical' term.

<sup>14</sup> It has been repeatedly announced that he is not allowed to run in the election due to his two suspended sentences. This interpretation was formulated on the basis of specific laws, whereas according to the constitution a suspended sentence does not strip one from their passive electoral right.

electoral race. He was the only candidate capable of being a genuine competitor (albeit not a threat) to Putin. Navalny's collaborators are regularly detained, his active supporters are being intimidated; attempts are being made to paralyse the activity of his campaign offices in Moscow and other regions. In contrast, the candidacy of Ksenia Sobchak, a well-known celebrity and journalist, who criticises both the Russian model of governance and Putin himself, serves the purpose of winning a portion of those voters who support the opposition. Most expert groups maintain that this candidacy is a Kremlin-backed project<sup>15</sup>. Unlike Navalny, Sobchak has no power and supporter base of her own; similarly, she has no real chance of achieving a meaningful result in the election.

**The fact that Putin is seeking re-election means that the Kremlin intends to continue its current repressive and isolationist policy.**

Nonetheless, the slogans she promotes may gain her a share of voters who are critical of the regime. Thereby, Sobchak is legitimising the Kremlin-manufactured illusion of an election in which political 'competitors' can participate, while Navalny is calling on his supporters to boycott the election should he be prevented from running in it<sup>16</sup>. Another candidate, Boris Titov, the ombudsman for entrepreneurs' rights and leader of the Party of Growth, loyal to the Kremlin, is intended to play a role similar to Sobchak's and to legitimise the election, in this case in the eyes of liberal business circles. Moreover, the group of candidates running in the election will traditionally include the veter-

ans of the Russian government-approved opposition, whose significance has been increasingly diminished: Gennadi Zyuganov, Vladimir Zhirinovski and Sergei Mironov.

Another element of the plan to legitimise the election involves attempts to make it appear more transparent. The President's administration has formulated guidelines for regional governments and electoral committees, including clear instructions on how to avoid election rigging and other scandals that could trigger post-election protests. The head of the Central Electoral Committee has voiced similar appeals to the administration, in which she announced for example that the number of cameras in polling stations will be significantly increased and open access to information about the election will be guaranteed. All this serves the purpose of not so much organising a fair election as of responding to a certain propaganda demand for creating an illusion that the law is being abided by<sup>17</sup>. In this context, a particularly important challenge is faced by regional governments: they will have to maintain a balance between guaranteeing the desired election result and turnout (for which they will be held accountable after the election) and performing these actions 'in velvet gloves', without resorting to flagrant vote-rigging (threatened by disciplinary or penal sanctions)<sup>18</sup>.

The Kremlin's organisational moves are accompanied by an attempt to formulate the electoral programme. Although Putin's official programme will likely be announced at the beginning of 2018, two main lines of propaganda are already evident: dialogue with young people (most probably as a reaction to Alexei

<sup>15</sup> The nature of Sobchak's candidacy will be ultimately revealed during subsequent stages of her campaign: without support from state administration bodies it is virtually impossible to collect the required number of signatures due to short deadlines defined in the regulations.

<sup>16</sup> Navalny is still waging his campaign to demand participation in the election.

<sup>17</sup> For example, there is a risk that most independent observers will be replaced with observers appointed by the Civic Chamber, an advisory body supervised by the executive power.

<sup>18</sup> It seems that the desired turnout is at least 60% (in Russia's presidential elections the turnout has never been lower), although the most ambitious goal is 70%. As regards the proportion of votes cast for Putin, the optimum figure is around 65–70%. According to a poll by the Levada Center conducted in November 2017, 58% of the respondents expressed their will to attend the election.

Navalny's mobilisation of secondary school pupils and students)<sup>19</sup> and pro-demographic initiatives intended to improve the situation of families, targeting the least affluent social groups whose members are the president's traditional electorate<sup>20</sup>. Positive actions also include personnel changes made in 2017 – especially among regional governors, which are intended to temporarily alleviate the tensions present in some of the regions and improve the government's image in advance of the election. Putin also made a token gesture to liberal groups and human rights defenders, when he ordered his administration to 'analyse' (which *de facto* does not mean anything) the recommendations by the presidential Council for Human Rights regarding the cases of violation of human rights and civil freedoms in Russia.

However, the government's true intentions can be seen in the initiatives carried out against the

background of the election campaign, confirming the regime's repressive and isolationist nature. These initiatives include the work of the Federation Council, underway since mid-2017, regarding the prevention of external interference in Russia's sovereignty<sup>21</sup>, the expansion of the law on foreign agents to include the media<sup>22</sup>, further limitation of unrestricted access to the internet and limiting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly (frequently under the pretext of combating extremism).

The fact that Putin is seeking re-election is tantamount to the Kremlin's will to solidify the present course of its politics. Initiatives intended to artificially boost the attractiveness of the electoral ritual, alongside mock efforts to reinvigorate the president's electoral programme, are merely attempts to shore up the legitimacy of a system that is devoid of any vision for the future and unable to generate incentives to modernisation.

---

<sup>19</sup> Since May 2017, Putin has regularly attended various meetings dedicated to the problems faced by children and youth. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/12/2017/5a280edc9a794720889f81a7?from=newsfeed>

<sup>20</sup> K. Chawryło, Putin's pro-family support programme, *OSW Analyses*, 6 December 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2017-12-06/putins-pro-family-support-programme>

---

<sup>21</sup> The committee's initial report on this matter was published in October 2017. <http://www.council.gov.ru/media/files/f8SAIXEeNH3T8krO2G1fHZA2W2hTRuMJ.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> M. Domańska, Rosja: cios w zagraniczne media, *Analizy OSW*, 16 November 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2017-11-16/rosja-cios-w-zagraniczne-media>

---

EDITORS: Adam Eberhardt, Marek Menkiszak

Anna Łabuszewska, Katarzyna Kazimierska

TRANSLATION: Magdalena Klimowicz

Co-operation: Timothy Harrell

DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski

Centre for Eastern Studies

Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw

phone: +48 | 22 | 525 80 00

e-mail: [info@osw.waw.pl](mailto:info@osw.waw.pl)

**The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities**

Visit our website: [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl)