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## Challenges in Putin's Re-election Campaign

Agnieszka Legucka

*Vladimir Putin announced on 6 December that he would take part in the presidential election scheduled for March 2018. According to the Russian constitution, this should be the incumbent president's last term in office. To prepare for a successor, he must increase control over the political elite and improve communication with the public. For this, he needs high voter turnout and a skilful defeat of rival interest groups seeking to access power.*

According to public opinion polls prepared by the Levada Center, 53% of the Russians surveyed plan to vote for Putin (who is 65), the remaining 41% of respondents say they have not decided on him or did not state for whom they will cast their vote. Putin is more highly rated than in 2012 when he was supported by 42% of Russians. Russia's election officials declared he had won with turnout of 65.34%, he won 71.31% of the votes in the first round.

**Previews of Social Welfare Reforms.** Putin has ruled Russia for 17 years (including four years as prime minister) and has enjoyed public support of 80–85%. At the same time, 53% of Russians say they expect changes in the country, especially in social welfare, such as raising the standard of living, improved healthcare, higher funding for education, reforming the judiciary, and combating corruption. In 2014–2016, Russians felt the effects of the collapse of the Russian economy related to the fall in oil prices and the sanctions imposed by the EU and the U.S., as well as the countersanctions introduced by Putin. In its wake, domestic demand dropped by 12.2% and the number of people living below the poverty line increased by 6 million people to 22 million. In the second quarter of this year, the poverty line for those employed was about RUB 11,000 (€160).

In response to these expectations, in November, Putin proposed new social welfare programmes. As part of Russia's National Children's Strategy, Putin announced financial support for children. From January 2018, parents will receive about RUB 10,000 (€145) per month for 18 months, and for second or subsequent children, they will be entitled to discounts on loans, including housing loans. The rates depend on where the family lives in Russia. In addition, Putin announced an extension of the "maternity capital" programme to 2021, under which mothers receive a payment of RUB 450,000 (about €6,500) on the birth of the second and subsequent children. The money can be used, for example, for the education of the child or payment for an apartment. From February 2018, pension indexation is also planned. The proposed changes, however, will not compensate for the falling real income of Russian citizens and there are no clear plans to improve the country's inefficient healthcare system or the judiciary.

**The Importance of Turnout.** According to the Levada Center survey, at the beginning of December, only 58% of respondents planned to participate in the election. The introduction of the new social welfare programmes is meant to persuade Russian citizens to vote. If the election has enough turnout and Putin wins by a substantial percentage (both at least at 70%), that would have a significant impact on the implementation of the president's plans for his constitutionally mandated last term. His most important task will be the appointment of a successor. The possibility of public protests after the elections could hinder this process and would constitute a blow to the prestige of Russia's power elite.

To further increase turnout, Putin made several staff changes in various Russian regions. In September, he removed 11 of the 85 governors in Dagestan, Samara, Buryatia, and Kaliningrad. In the official message, the move was intended to serve as a “rejuvenation” of the elite that will rule the country after the 2018 election. Seven of the new governors are about 40 years old. A similar change of regional leaders took place in 2012–2013, but was carried out mainly after the presidential election (then, 30 governors were replaced). The replacement of executive branch personnel is aimed at improving participation in the election, especially in more rural parts of Russia, where turnout in the earlier elections was lower than the national average (in 2012, in the areas where the governor was just replaced, it was about 50%). In addition, Putin’s election team counts on the public viewing the new personnel as not associated with regional economic problems and corruption. During his annual press conference, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev argued that in 2016–2017, 800 public officials were brought to justice for corruption, which was stated to show how important this issue is for the government.

**Contenders.** Under a 2014 amendment to the election law, candidates for president of the Russian Federation must collect 100,000 signatures by 9 February (2018) if their party nominates them and 300,000 otherwise. Because the requirements are significantly easier to achieve than in the earlier regulation, when candidates had to have the support of 2 million people, seventeen political activists and people with business and culture backgrounds have already become candidates.<sup>1</sup> Putin’s traditional competitors are Gennady Zyganov (age 73) from the Communist Party, Grigory Jawliński (65) from the Yabloko party, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (71) from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

The election campaign was enlivened by the announcement of the candidacy of Ksenia Sobchak (36), the daughter of a former Putin protector who has been an active opposition activist for several years. Using the slogan “against all,” Sobchak claims to be outside the system. She is a former journalist and TV presenter, making her recognisable in Russia, but opinion polling shows some 60% of Russians have a negative attitude towards her. Some of her ideas, such as holding a new referendum in Crimea and the removal of Lenin’s body from his mausoleum on Red Square, are not backed by Russians. In terms of the presidency, she polls at only 1%, in part because the electorate does not believe in her full independence.

Putin’s greatest political competitor in this campaign is Alexei Navalny (41), although a court ruling in February may mean he cannot stand for president. Navalny is known for his fight against corruption, especially among the political elite of the state. In March, during his appeal of the court ruling, more than 100,000 anti-government mass demonstrations took place. In the months since then, the authorities have made it difficult for him to organise meetings with residents of the Russian Federation, intimidated students and youth, attempted to marginalise him with information put into various media, and arrested his close associates. However, these actions have not deterred him or his intensive campaign of agitation, mainly through social networks and the internet. At the same time, Navalny, knowing he really has no chance to participate in the election, will call for a boycott. He will not support Sobchak, whom he views as a rival for the votes of young Russians and a candidate put up by the ruling camp.

**Perspectives.** To achieve the desire for high turnout and support for Putin, his staff, the state apparatus, including media, will actively promote the current leader of Russia as the guarantor of stability and the only person in the campaign who cares about ordinary citizens. In the fight for voters, Putin will also be helped by the lack of an alternative, real opponent. Sobchak will divide the opposition but increase the number of voters, especially among young people. The administration will use the schools and universities to mobilise voters. Russians will be persuaded to vote but discouraged from participating in protests organised by Navalny. In turn, the task of the governors will be to ensure peace and security before, during and after the vote. Navalny may organise demonstrations following the election to protest the results and suggest it was undemocratic because of a lack of representation of all candidates. This possibility may mean he will be arrested before the vote to try to prevent such actions.

The vast public support for Putin has helped him consolidate power during this term. Soon, an internal struggle for his successor will begin, and the political elite and individual interest groups will compete for influence. This process will be important for the future scope of Russian foreign policy. Although Russia’s confrontational policy towards the U.S. and the EU is not conducive to the economic interests of the Russian elite, it is useful in domestic politics. Therefore, the rhetoric aimed at Western countries will intensify, especially against the U.S. It will serve to mobilise Russians against these supposed external threats and in turn, Putin will gain public support for strengthening the *siloviki* (the FSB and the military) in Russia’s political system.

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<sup>1</sup> As of 13 December 2017.