

Russia's Latest Elections Leave Its Problems Unresolved

Legislative elections were held over three days in Russia last weekend to elect 450 deputies of the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly. President Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party won just under 50 percent of the vote and 324 seats in an election accompanied [by the customary accusations of vote rigging](#) from the opposition and by the usual hostility [from the Western media machine](#).

The Biden administration had the gall to condemn the Russian election as flawed and undemocratic. A spokesman for the U.S. Department of State said that the conditions were "[not conducive to free and fair proceedings](#)." This was really rich, coming from an administration [which owes its brazen power grab](#) to a host of illegitimate and fraudulent proceedings. Pot meet kettle.

Russia's foreign ministry summoned U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan a week before the election to protest violations of Russian laws by unnamed American tech giants. Just days later, Apple and Google removed an app from their stores which was created by the opposition group supporting Alexei Navalny [to promote candidates running against United Russia](#). It seems likely that the apps were added to the stores with [some encouragement from the U.S. Government](#), but its "[democracy-promotion](#)" of course does not count as "[interference](#)."

The biggest problem with the Russian political system is not vote rigging or foreign interference, however. Its elections are at worst no more tainted than our own. Even if it had been conducted under Marquis of Queensberry rules, last week's Duma bout likely would not have yielded a significantly different result. The public is aware of this and there have been no public protests, in contrast with the aftermath of some

previous elections, [notably in the winter of 2011-2012](#).

The main problem with the Russian political system is its excessive dependence on one man, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who will turn 69 next month. After more than 20 years in power—mostly as president and briefly as prime minister—Putin appears to have lost the vigor and strategic sureness of touch which characterized his first decade in the Kremlin, when he presided over Russia's impressive political and economic recovery after the disastrous Yeltsin years. Putin's popularity is still [over 60 percent](#). After obtaining constitutional changes in 2020 he is likely to [seek reelection in 2024](#) and win again. If his health holds, theoretically he could remain in charge until 2036.

To what end? The question is legitimate, because the Russian state and nation face enormous challenges and no strategy for dealing with them is on the cards.

- Russia's population [is shrinking, with a net loss of over half a million people](#) in 2020, and four-fifths of its territory east of the Urals remains virtually unpopulated.
- Its economy [is expected to grow by 4.4 percent](#) this year, after contracting by 3 percent in 2020, but its exports are still heavily dependent on [hydrocarbons](#) and raw materials, which is unacceptably high for a developed economy.
- Since the Western sanctions were imposed in 2014 Russia has tried, with limited success, to reduce its dependence on imported machinery, pharmaceuticals, electronics, and cars.
- Russia had the fourth largest economy in the world in 1913, but last year it ranked [eleventh](#) and it is [projected to account](#) for only 2 percent of global GDP for the next two decades.
- The [average wealth per capita](#) in Russia ranked only 92nd

in 2019, far behind the United States and most European countries.

- Russia's geostrategic position is precarious: it has lost a buffer zone in Ukraine and today its western borders correspond to those drawn by Emperor Peter I three centuries ago.

It is not clear how Putin intends to deal with these and other pressing issues. Over the past decade he has acted more like the CEO of a huge, stagnant company than a strategist with a clear vision for his nation's future. And yet that vision is vitally necessary to release Russia's enormous, untapped resources, to halt and reverse its demographic decline, and to manage increasingly complex relations with the U.S., Europe, China, and the Islamic world.

The problem is compounded by Putin's evident reluctance to groom an heir apparent, and by the absence of clear rules for the transition of power in case of his sudden departure. Three decades after the dissolution of the USSR, the weakness of state institutions and mechanisms remains a defining feature of Russia's political system. It cannot afford the kind of protracted power struggle which followed the death of Stalin in 1953.

Until August 2007 it looked like the succession could go to [Sergei Ivanov, Putin's first deputy prime minister](#) at the time and the youngest general in the Russian foreign intelligence service. Then it was the turn of Dmitry Medvedev. He even served four years as Russia's president (2008-2012), but during that time all real power had migrated to the office of the prime minister—Putin himself. Medvedev's star has been in decline for some years now. He is said to lack authority and he has failed to establish a power base among Russia's political and economic elite.

In January 2020 [Putin replaced Medvedev as prime minister](#) with an obscure tax official, Mikhail Mishustin, a technocrat with

no national ambitions and no political base. Some of my Russian colleagues saw that decision as a clear indication that Putin sees himself as *de facto* president for life. Had he wanted to groom a new face, a younger man, this was the time to do so.

Russia's fortunes have always depended on the personal qualities of the leader at the top, starting in modern times with Peter the Great, who reformed his giant realm much against the will of his subjects. His foundations of modern statehood were ably used by Tsarina Catherine, who turned Russia into a great European power.

Putin played a significant role at another extremely challenging moment in his nation's history: a time of Russia's acute weakness which four successive U.S. presidents had used to expand NATO and to establish the system of unipolar global hegemony. His reluctance to imagine a post-Putin Russia, and pave the way for an orderly succession, is indicative of an unfortunate narcissistic streak which seems inevitable in politicians. It will be self-defeating for Russia if Putin continues to preside on a long road to nowhere until after he turns 80. It will be doubly so if he suddenly leaves the scene, and Russia's still-unconsolidated political system finds the strain unbearable.

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