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Putin Takes Commanding Lead in Poll

By Ken Martinez

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Members of the elections commission counting votes during a weekend trial run in which Peter the Great won. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Despite months of ongoing protests, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has the support of a commanding 66 percent of the population in the final days before he seeks to return to the presidency for the third time, an independent poll has found.

If the prime minister receives that level of support in the March 4 vote, he would win handily in the first round of voting and thwart the opposition goal of pushing the election into a runoff.

The independent Levada Center poll put out Friday found that Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov is in second place with 15 percent. He is followed by ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party head Vladimir Zhirinovsky with 8 percent. Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov came in fourth with 6 percent and Just Russia candidate Sergei Mironov was last in the poll at 5 percent.

But the poll — conducted Feb. 17 to 20 — also found diminishing support for Putin and his United Russia party, showing that more than one-third of Russians supported street protests against vote-stuffing though only 13 percent said they had taken part in the rallies.

Just under one-fifth said they supported the slogans "Russia without Putin" or "Putin should go."

The results sent Russian stocks up 4 percent to a seven-month high Friday, driven by greater confidence that Putin will win in the first round and avert weeks of uncertainty.

In a rehearsal at 12 voting stations on Saturday for the March 4 vote, a mock election found Peter the Great outstripping the competition in a bid to become Russia's next president.

His opponents were Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Winston Churchill and Genghis Khan, the Moscow elections commission said, RIA-Novosti reported.

The voting stations held a vote replicating the procedures to be used in the March 4 election. The rehearsal was also an opportunity to test the video cameras installed at each location.

The ballots included information about each candidate, including date of birth, nominating party, marital status and a summary of achievements.

At one voting station, 40 people participated in the vote, which ended after 90 minutes. Twenty-six voted for Peter the Great, six for Genghis Khan, and four for Alexander the Great, while Napoleon Bonaparte and Winston Churchill each received two votes.

Citywide, Peter the Great won by a large margin, but exact results will only be available Monday, the elections committee said.

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