

Why Putin Will Face More Protests

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's victory in Sunday's election means he will return to the Kremlin once again, albeit in far less triumphant fashion than he had imagined in September.

The other four candidates mounted surprisingly passive campaigns. Not only did they take pains to avoid criticizing Putin, but they were careful to maintain a low profile by making few campaign trips and showing little initiative. Liberal Democratic Party head Vladimir Zhirinovskiy earned fewer votes than ever in a lackluster campaign where it seemed as if he went out of his way to lose votes.

Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov also failed to impress. He garnered fewer votes and suffered the largest decline in relation to his party's showing in the December State Duma elections than all four other candidates.

Although Mikhail Prokhorov visited five regions — as compared to Putin's 18 — he focused his efforts on the Internet. The Kremlin guessed correctly that Prokhorov's participation would give a degree of novelty and added legitimacy to the presidential election.

Apparently, the methods used to rig elections have changed. The ballot box-stuffing and "carousel" voting, in which groups of people are bused to several polling places to cast multiple votes, have become less effective than before, while the use of administrative resources increased in size.

This was most obvious in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the Kremlin solved the extremely difficult task of raising the number of votes for Putin to match his stronger showing in the regions while minimizing the vote-rigging so as to avoid scandals and protests. This was accomplished by busing in a large number of pro-Putin voters from several regions along with a large number of police and Interior Troops.

Sunday's election also apparently broke a record for the use of absentee ballots. And the wholesale use of "carousels" should logically result in the Central Elections Commission declaring a significantly higher voter turnout than for the Duma elections in December.

If we are witnessing a new side to Putin, it is only in the sense that he worked harder to win this election than he did in previous votes. It would seem that this election marked not so much the start of a new political era as the end of the current one. Putin, Mironov and Zhirinovskiy appear to be approaching the end of their political careers. In all likelihood, none of them will take part in the next presidential election — which might be held earlier than 2018.

The Duma and presidential elections are over, but the process of change they have sparked will continue for years. The impetus for that change stems from mass protests over blatant electoral fraud.

What will happen next?

Much depends on how the authorities respond to future political protests and whether they, in response, institute meaningful reforms. There is no reason to believe, as many in the Kremlin do, that the protests and the problems associated with them will end now that the election is over.

The Kremlin has yet to adequately respond to the protesters' demands. This probably means that the protests will increase in size and intensity. What's more, Russians face hikes in their utility bills coupled with cuts to social spending and pensions, despite election promises to the contrary. This alone could be enough to prompt people to take to the streets demanding change.

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