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Putin and the Passions (Op-ed)

Tens of millions of Russians went to the polls on Sunday and cast their ballots for Putin, willingly and even enthusiastically

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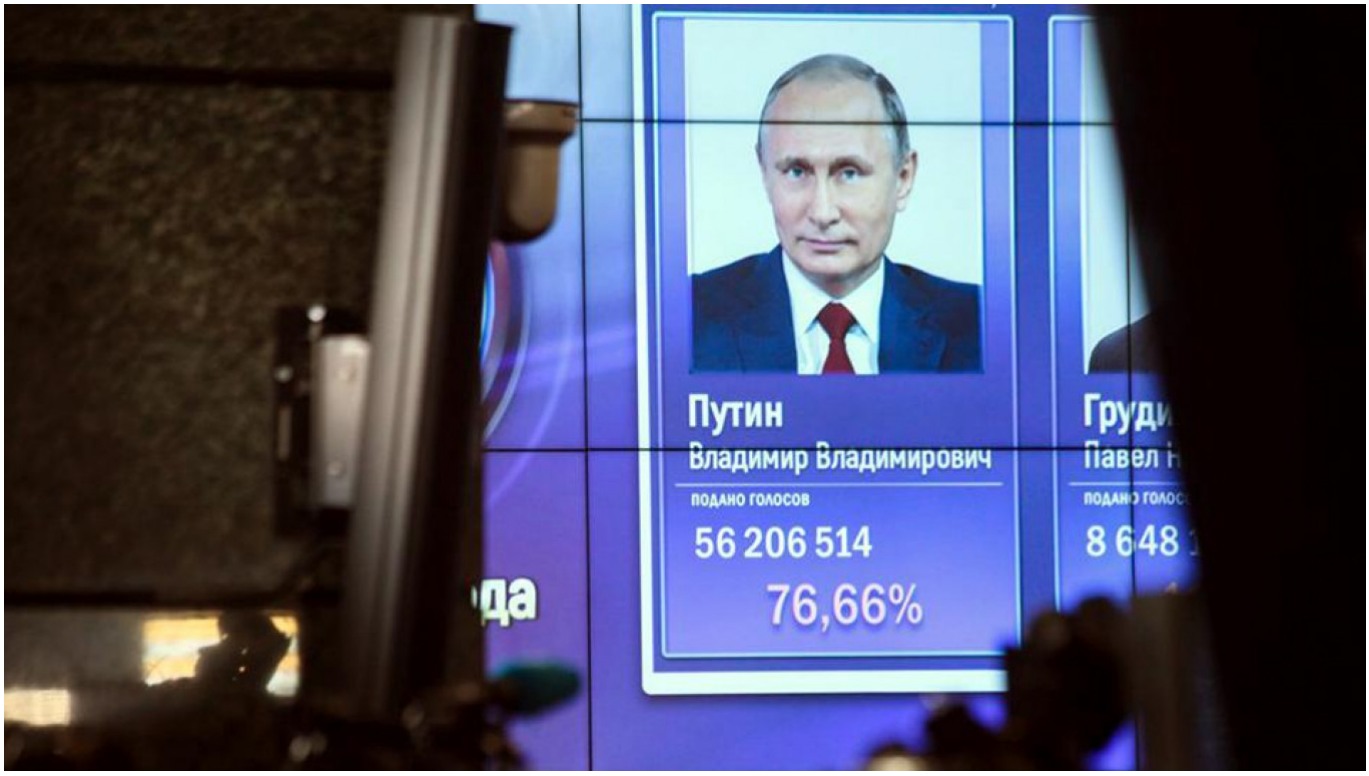

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What just happened in Russia?

Officially, Vladimir Putin took 76.7 percent of the vote, winning his fourth term as Russia's president. His closest competitor, the Communist Party candidate Pavel Grudinin, got 11.8 percent. Again officially, the nationwide turnout was 67.5 percent, somewhat higher than in 2012.

Of course, there are serious problems with all of those figures. Independent election observers noted widespread falsifications ⊠ particularly ballot stuffing ⊠ around the country, much of which was caught on camera and shared online in entertaining videos.

More systematically, statistical analysis by Sergei Shpilkin already shows how widespread the fraud was. In addition, 1.5 million voters were added to the electoral rolls even as the votes were being counted. And, perhaps most significant of all, the Kremlin controlled access to the ballot and to television. This was no free and fair election.

But does that mean that it was meaningless?

Tens of millions of Russians went to the polls on Sunday and cast their ballots for Putin, willingly and even enthusiastically.

For many of these voters ⊠ perhaps even most ⊠ Putin's victory needed to be ensured and for them voting was an important and meaningful act of participation in the political life of their country. Those in Russia who would like to see change, and those in the West who would like to predict it, need to understand why.

Related article: Putin Easily Wins Another Six-Year Term in the Kremlin

It is broadly understood that the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing conflict with Ukraine and the West did wonders for Putin's popularity, boosting his approval numbers from the mid-60s to the mid-80s. And, while some people might lie to pollsters, the best available research suggests that fear of telling the truth accounts for no more than a few percent of those ratings.

What is less broadly understood, however, is the extent to which Crimea and geopolitical conflict transformed many Russians' emotional connection with their state.

Prior to Crimea, Putin was popular, but he wasn't inspiring. In a poll we ran in October 2013 ⊠ just five months before the annexation ⊠ only 15 percent of respondents said they were proud of their president, only 22 percent said he made them feel hopeful, and only 25 percent said they trusted him.

Crimea changed that: In a second poll of the same people in July 2014, 37 percent said they were proud of Putin, 44 percent said he made them hopeful and 46 percent said he inspired their trust.

So far, so ordinary: Lots of political leaders benefit from a rally around the flag effect in times of conflict. Think Margaret Thatcher during the Falklands War, or George W. Bush after 9/11.

But while most rallies fade, Putin's has buoyed his support through four years of declining standards of living for ordinary Russians and taken him into Sunday's victory — such as it was. And that's because the Crimean "moment" has helped many ⊠ though by no means all ⊠ Russians feel better not just about their president, but about their country as a whole.

Not only did our survey respondents tell us that they had a greater emotional attachment to Putin, but also that they felt the Russian economy was doing better than it had been less than a year earlier (it wasn't), and that both high-level and petty corruption had gone down (it hadn't).

In other words, large numbers of Russians ⊠ and the same ones who helped Putin put space between the economy and his approval ratings ⊠ had come to feel not just that Putin was better, but that life was better.

What's more, those Russian citizens who were most likely to feel better about Russia as a whole were precisely those who were most emotionally caught up in the "Crimean moment." Most Russians both before and after Crimea got most of their news from state-controlled television, but the amount of news ⊠ and in particular political and geopolitical news ⊠ on television nearly doubled by some accounts after the annexation.

Related article: Putin Wins Presidency With Historic Record Number of Votes

In addition, more and more of our survey respondents began both to pay attention specifically to politics, and to report having discussed it with their friends, colleagues and family members.

For many of these people that increased engagement with politics evoked a positive emotional response. And it was this sense of attachment that, according to our research, led them to feel better about life in Russia as a whole. This was also true of Russian nationalists and patriots who had previously been ambivalent about Putin.

Caricaturing the election ⊠ and Putin's rule more broadly ⊠ as simply an exercise in manipulation, coercion and fear will not help anyone understand where the country is headed. Yes, those things are a very important part of how Putin and his Kremlin maintain control, together with healthy doses of corruption and clientelism. But Putin's voters, by and large, were not frog-marched to the polls on Sunday.

Those Russians who have helped keep Putin popular see in him a symbol of their hopes and aspirations for themselves and their communities. That does not mean that they are naive or irrational.

It means simply that, like voters everywhere, many Russian citizens want to feel part of something bigger. Putin has helped them do that. As a result, if Russia's next leader is to come through the ballot box, it will take more than a free and fair election.

Whoever might seek to replace Putin will have to do more than convince Russians that their economy is suffering, that they have been lied to or that they have placed their faith in a false prophet.

She or he will have to capture Russians' emotions ⊠ inspire their pride, hope and trust ⊠ and allow them to continue to feel connected to a positive political project.

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