

Why Russians in New York and Amsterdam Voted for Putin (Op-ed)

Consciously or not, Russian expats long for the protective arms of the motherland

By [Artemy Troitsky](#)

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Viktor Drachyov / TASS

There was nothing surprising about the results of the March 18 presidential elections.

What was surprising were the lengths President Vladimir Putin had to go to obtain his coveted turnout. It should have been child's play for his administration to inspire a large turnout and win 70 percent of the vote. But apparently it wasn't.

"Professional" voters still had to be bussed from one polling station to the next, state employees were hauled out of bed at 7 a.m on a Sunday morning and ballot boxes were stuffed. Still, the results fell short of the goal by a few percent.

But even more surprising was how many Russian expats voted and who they voted for.

If data from the Central Elections Commission is anything to go by, approximately 400,000 Russian citizens voted in around 400 polling stations abroad.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova announced that these figures were “unprecedented” and “amazing.” In fact, they weren’t; 452,000 voted abroad in presidential elections in 2012.

The Foreign Ministry also made the outlandish claim that 98 percent of all expats voted, even though CEC data indicates that 1.9 million Russians were living abroad in January 2018.

Simple arithmetic indicates that the expat turnout did not exceed 24 percent, which is unimpressive at best. Even though so few turned out to vote, of those that did, 85 percent cast their ballots for quasi-tsar Putin – far more than the 76 percent in Russia.

Unlike their compatriots at home, the Russians who voted in Paris and San Francisco were not confronted by cordons of military personnel or state employees “monitoring” their polling stations. Neither were they rewarded with coupons or vodka.

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The core of Putin’s expat electorate resides in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Moldova, Latvia, South Ossetia and Estonia. These are mostly Russian pensioners who pine for the Soviet Union, watch Russian state television all day and make no effort to assimilate. An incredible 95 percent of these expats voted for Putin.

In Estonia, only one-third of the Russians voted, but of those who turned out, 94 percent voted for Putin. It seems that the two-thirds that did not vote are part of more recent waves of immigration.

Of the 24 acquaintances I spoke to in Tallinn and Tartu, including businessmen, journalists, musicians, activists, managers, doctors, teachers and even a yoga instructor — all of whom recently left Russia but kept their citizenship — most had chosen not to vote out of principle.

More surprising again was the 49 percent in Amsterdam and 51 percent in London that voted for Putin.

Although those figures are considerably lower than in the former Soviet republics, it is still high given that these Russians are generally prosperous, well-educated members of the middle and upper-middle classes who have access to a range of alternative sources of information. Freewheeling Amsterdam is far removed from Putin and his scare tactics.

This phenomenon seems especially strange when comparing the results of 2012 and 2018. Six years ago, Putin garnered only 27 percent of the expat vote in London, even placing behind his hand-picked “rival,” the oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov. That trend was replicated this year across other Western urban hubs like New York, Berlin and Paris.

Overall, Putin won 73 percent of the expat vote in 2012 compared to 85 percent in 2018.

Although there is some comfort in knowing that more than 75 percent of Russian expats did not vote at all this time, it is obvious that support is growing for Putin among members of the diaspora.

Russian Ambassador to Estonia Alexander Petrov explained Putin's strong showing there as the result of his real achievements in the past six years, his program for the future, Russians' solidarity in the face of "sanctions and provocation" and the effectiveness of Russian media in Estonia.

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That last point is true enough, but the others are not very convincing. Apart from annexing Crimea, this administration has accomplished nothing. Putin's "program for the future" consists of bombastic demagoguery and the "sanctions and provocations" have little impact on Russians living in Estonia.

Political analysts offer other reasons for this pro-Putin trend: homesickness for Russia, the weak showing by the political opposition and Putin's forceful style of communicating with the West.

There is a common denominator to the thinking and attitudes of many, though not all, Russians living abroad, whether they are in Kyrgyzstan or the United States. This is the feeling of uneasy caution, alienation and vulnerability.

As a friend aptly put it, "Russian expats have eyes like lost puppies." Consciously or not, these people long for the protective arms of Mother Russia. They are doubtless the expats who march off to the nearest Russian embassy or consulate to vote for You-Know-Who, the tough guy who protects his own and who everybody fears.

And now that ordinary Russians everywhere feel just how deeply unhappy with the Kremlin the West has become, their sense of vulnerability and resentment has grown noticeably stronger. They yearn for Mother Russia's muscular protection like never before. This is why support for Putin has risen so markedly in London, Paris, and New York.

Of course, one could argue that it is precisely because of Vladimir Putin's actions that the world increasingly views Russia as a rogue state and Russians as somehow suspect, and that the situation will not improve as long as Putin remains in power.

However, sober arguments and logic generally hold little influence over the emotional "Russian soul." And besides, Russian voters — at home and abroad — have already decided this question for the next six years.

Artemy Troitsky is a journalist and teacher in Tallinn, Estonia. The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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