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Russia's Opposition in Exile Calls on EU Not to Recognize Putin's Election

By Pyotr Kozlov

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Pyotr Kozlov / MT

A month before Russia's presidential election, certain to be won again by President Vladimir Putin, the country's anti-war opposition in exile admits that it is unable to influence the results but hopes the West will "do the right thing."

None of Putin's opponents will be able to participate in the March election or organize independent monitoring of the vote, while the Kremlin is expected to claim a high-score victory in the polls.

The only thing left for Russia's opposition — most of whom had to flee the country to remain free — is to try to show that Putin's support among Russian citizens is not that high but artificially inflated by propaganda.

With many Russian citizens opposed to the country's war in Ukraine, Brussels should not

recognize Putin as a legitimate president after the polls, the country's opposition has urged.

"The Kremlin is trying to send a propaganda message to the whole world — that supposedly 85% of Russians are in favor of Putin," Leonid Volkov, former chief of staff of the late Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and the former head of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF), said in Brussels on Wednesday.

The idea is to signal that "Putin cannot be defeated unless all of Russia is defeated — and this is unlikely," Volkov added.

The Kremlin was tasking regional authorities with ensuring that 80% of the votes go to the Russian leader, independent outlet Meduza reported last summer.

According to Volkov, who cited the results of a November telephone survey of Russians conducted by the ACF, in reality, support for Putin is below 50%.

However, some independent experts criticized the methodology used by Navalny's supporters and put the results of the study into doubt.

At present, no independent sociological centers are operating in Russia to publish credible survey results.

"Putin talks about denazification, about the LGBT threat. And in reality, Russians want the war to end as soon as possible," Volkov said.

'Against Putin at noon'

Participants in a recent European Parliament event — including Vladimir Milov, a former Russian deputy energy minister who lives in exile and opposes Putin, and exiled lawyer Vadim Prokhorov, head of the Free Russia Foundation — all joined together to urge Russians to go to the polling stations at noon on March 17, the last day of the three-day voting.

They said that Russian voters queuing outside polling stations on the last voting day at noon should help show how people don't support Putin, which could be a big contrast to empty polling stations on other days.

"The issue of the election's recognition of legitimacy is an extremely important and sensitive one for the Putin regime," said Prokhorov, who defended imprisoned opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza, sentenced to 25 years in prison for state treason.

The idea behind the action, which they call "noon against Putin," is "not to oppose Putin's manipulation, for which the opposition has no resources and no observers," Volkov said, "but to let those Russians who do not support Putin and the war see each other and feel that they are not alone."

Putin cannot be given legitimacy, which is what he desires most, said Natalia Arno of the Free Russia Foundation.

"Changes in Russia will not come quickly. But they will come when people act together and in a coordinated way," she said.

Non-recognition needed

EU lawmaker Andrius Kubilius (Lithuania, EPP), the European Parliament's special rapporteur on Russia, said he would propose that the EU not recognize the results of the "so-called" election.

But the discussion about this should begin after the election has taken place, Kubilius said.

As an example, he cited the non-recognition by European Parliament members and a number of EU member states the results of the 2020 Belarusian election, which declared incumbent autocrat Alexander Lukashenko, an ally of the Kremlin, the clear winner.

However, according to Luc Devigne, deputy director for Eastern Europe in the EU's diplomatic service EEAS, there is no such thing as non-recognition of elections in international law.

"Recognizing or not recognizing elections is more of a political question. What does it change?" Devigne asked.

More importantly, he believes it reiterates the EU's position that Russia is violating its international obligations by failing to invite the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) as an election observer.

The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) justified its refusal to invite observers from the OSCE, EU, and Council of Europe by citing their "ideological bias."

Putin paved the way

Putin's most important opponent, politician Alexei Navalny, was reported dead on Friday by the prison authorities where he was serving his 19-year sentence, above the Arctic Circle, in Russia's Yamal-Nenets autonomous district.

Navalny's ACF has been designated as an "extremist organization," and any cooperation with it is threatened with criminal prosecution in Russia.

Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Liliya Chanysheva and hundreds of other lesser-known opposition activists, human rights defenders, and opposition activists have either already received sentences or are awaiting court sentences in pre-trial detention centers.

After the Russian army's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin criminalized any criticism of Putin and the invasion itself.

The Kremlin-controlled parliament passed legislation on "discrediting the army" and "fake news," making it impossible for independent media to exist and depriving the opposition of the ability to reach out to ordinary Russian citizens.

By controlling the candidate nomination process — the rules are difficult to enforce and the election organizer, the formally independent CEC, is de facto subordinate to the presidential administration — the Kremlin has put up a barrier to any dissenters.

Even veteran politician Boris Nadezhdin, the only candidate who has spoken out on the need

for Russia to end the war in Ukraine, was denied registration. This came after long lines in support of Nadezhdin's nomination caused wariness in the Kremlin.

New methods

Even though Putin's rivals include three fully Kremlin-controlled candidates, voting in the presidential election will for the first time last three days instead of a single day.

With the help of another innovation — controversial online electronic voting at the command of the Kremlin — it is currently possible to force state and municipal employees, employees of state corporations and major companies with a state stake, where millions of people work across the country, to vote on their personal computers and even on their smartphones, right at their workplaces, under the control of their immediate bosses.

In addition, the CEC is preparing to hold voting in four annexed regions of Ukraine — the occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, currently controlled by Russian troops.

There, even residents who have not received a Russian passport will be allowed to vote, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported.

According to Russian law, voting in these territories can be held as early as 20 days before the main voting day, which would mean late February, but could happen in early March, according to the Kommersant business daily, which cited unnamed sources in the Russian-appointed administrations of the occupied territories.

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