The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Re-Election Must Be Deemed Illegitimate: Vladimir Kara-Murza Writes From Prison

By Vladimir Kara-Murza

March 12, 2024



Russian opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza. **Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS**

The radio in my prison cell is turned on all day, from the wake-up call at 5 a.m. to the lights-out at 9 p.m. And the closer it gets to the weekend of March 15, the more announcements I hear on the air about the so-called presidential election. I don't mean, of course, campaign ads that you would expect in democratic countries. No, the announcements are all simply telling listeners the different ways they can cast their vote, in-person and online.

Many people wonder why dictatorships even bother to hold "elections" when everyone knows that they are nothing but staged, meaningless rituals. But in the 21st century, the only broadly accepted source of legitimacy for any government comes in the form of a ballot box — and even regimes that don't have real legitimacy feel the need to create an appearance of it.

Sometimes they go too far for their own good. In 2020, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko allowed opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya on the ballot to make his term extension look more credible. The result, by most independent accounts, was an overwhelming victory for Tikhanovskaya that had to be undone by fraud. This, in turn, triggered the largest street protests of Lukashenko's rule.

Vladimir Putin learned his neighbor's lesson. His strongest opponents have been eliminated — not figuratively but literally: Boris Nemtsov was murdered in February 2015, Alexei Navalny in February 2024.

But even cautious opposition was assessed by the Kremlin as too risky. When Boris Nadezhdin, a lawyer and a former member of parliament who had criticized the war in Ukraine, decided to run for president, his campaign got an instantaneous liftoff: long lines of (mostly young) people formed in cities and towns across Russia to sign petitions for his nomination; his campaign received tens of millions of rubles in individual donations; and his support in the polls shot up into double digits. Not surprisingly, the Central Election Commission barred Nadezhdin from the ballot, using the usual technical pretexts.

Related article: 'Our Country Is Sinking Into Darkness': Oleg Orlov's Final Word in Court

The only "competitors" Putin will face in the upcoming elections will be token candidates from the officially permitted "opposition" parties — all of whom go to great lengths to avoid any criticism of him and back his war in Ukraine. The same can be said of all the remaining major media outlets in Russia.

Meanwhile, those Russians who do publicly speak out against Putin and his war are punished with prison. By the most conservative estimates, the current number of political prisoners runs in the hundreds, while the total number of Russians who faced criminal or administrative punishment since 2018 for exercising free speech, according to a recent media investigation, comes to an astonishing 116,000 people. There have been more political trials during Putin's most recent presidential term alone than under Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev combined.

But it's not only the absence of opposition candidates, media censorship and large-scale repression that make Russia's upcoming election illegitimate. One other reason is that Putin has no right to be on the ballot at all. Russia's 1993 constitution limited the president to two consecutive four-year terms. Putin — who has been in power since 2000 — found a way to go around this limit. Between 2008 and 2012, after his first set of two consecutive terms had ended, he ruled Russia as prime minister through a puppet de jure president (Dmitry Medvedev, if anyone remembers his name). Putin's second set of terms (increased from four to six years) runs out on May 7. This time, he chose a different way of staying in the Kremlin: In 2020, he rammed through more than 200 constitutional amendments, including one giving him a personal exemption from the term limit.

If the Medvedev ruse, though obviously undemocratic, was technically legal, the term-limit exemption is not. The hasty procedure for passing the amendments violated Russian law in

several ways — a conclusion confirmed by Europe's top constitutional law panel in its detailed legal opinion. The European Parliament has called Putin's constitutional amendments "illegally enacted."

Related article: Fear Is Part of Life in Russia. But Navalny Said We Mustn't Be Afraid

The only logical, and the only honest, political response to this from the world's democracies would be to deny recognition of Vladimir Putin as the legitimate leader of Russia after May 7 — in the same way they have refused to recognize the legitimacy of, for example, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela or Lukashenko in Belarus.

The first step toward such formal nonrecognition of Putin was taken by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its overwhelmingly passed recommendation to European governments last October. The same recommendation was made last month by Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of Russia's opposition leader, at a meeting of European Union foreign ministers. A similar initiative has been discussed in the U.S. Congress.

Western leaders often speak of their determination to stand up to the Kremlin. Sometimes the most powerful tool of all is simply telling the truth. Putin is not a legitimately elected president. He is a dictator and a usurper. It's time the free world finally said so.

This article was originally published in the Washington Post*.*

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/12/putins-re-election-must-be-deemed-illegitimate-vladimir-kara-murza-writes-from-prison-a84433