The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

On Red Square, Putin Voters Bask in Predictable Victory

By AFP

March 19, 2024



kremlin.ru

Thousands of people gathered on Moscow's Red Square on Monday roared when President Vladimir Putin appeared on a stage, a day after his victory in elections where he stood unchallenged.

Putin hailed the "return" of Ukrainian territories to Russia during a concert marking 10 years since his country annexed Crimea -- a step seen by many as a precursor to the 2022 full-scale offensive.

Russians had been called during the elections to throw their weight behind the ongoing military operation in Ukraine, cast as a show of support for Putin's offensive.

"Any citizen who respects our country voted for Putin," said Elena, a 62-year-old economist in a bright red coat and matching lipstick.

She rejoiced at Putin's "not at all surprising" win.

Victory will allow Putin to stay in power longer than any Russian leader since Catherine the Great.

Embed:

> At a Red Square rally to celebrate Crimea's annexation, Putin invited the other Kremlin-controlled candidates from his re-election onstage. They are talked about being "proud of the country and the president," then sang the national anthem. Democracy in action, Russian style pic.twitter.com/W8U4eUwn9n
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> — max seddon (@maxseddon) March 18, 2024

Ever since becoming president at the turn of the century, he has stamped out any genuine opposition.

He had run unchallenged in the elections, with only loyalist candidates allowed on the ballot.

His top opponent, Alexei Navalny died in prison last month, which his allies blamed directly on the Kremlin.

'One big family'

But there was no doubt among the Russians who flocked to the celebrations on Moscow's Red Square, waving white-blue-red flags as artists followed one another one stage.

"We're just one big family, we share the same views, the same opinions, the same positivity," said Anastasia Kim, a 20-year-old student.

After a performance from rock band Lyube — said to be a favorite of Putin's — the Russian leader finally came on stage.

He hailed the annexation of Crimea, and of the four Ukrainian regions seized since the 2022 offensive.

"The return to their homeland turned out to be harder, more tragic, but nevertheless, we did it," Putin said.

Russia claims to have annexed four regions of Ukraine — Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzia — without fully controlling them.

It declared the four regions as Russian after referendums held amid ongoing combat, widely denounced as shams by Kyiv and Western countries.

Kim pushed back on criticism from the West, which has shut out Russia over the offensive in Ukraine.

"You don't understand Russia, you don't understand anything, because in Russia there is life, we only bring peace," she said.

'Everything will get better'

Other concert attendees shared their emotions over Russian soldiers killed in action.

Olga Malanushenko, 48, started crying for fallen soldiers who "would not see this world again".

Both Kyiv and Moscow have shrouded their military losses in secrecy.

The UN's human rights office has also acknowledged that the civilian toll is considerably higher than the roughly 10,000 people it had confirmed dead.

And Russia has been hit by a flurry of sanctions from the West, aiming to cripple the economy.

Viktoria, who came to the concert "to support the homeland," remained optimistic.

Putin "is the foundation of the country, I trust him... It's only going to get better and better," she told AFP.

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