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'The Beginning of the End of Putin's System'

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Everyone expected Vladimir Putin to win Russia's presidential election on Sunday. Though the opposition may have protested in recent weeks, they are still too weak to effect real change. But growing resistance among the middle class could ultimately doom the strongman, German commentators warn.

As election results go, it was one of the least surprising in recent years. Vladimir Putin will serve a third term as Russian president after winning a [predictably resounding victory](#) in Sunday's election.

Equally unsurprising were the opposition's claims of electoral fraud, another constant in Russian elections. There were accounts of multiple voting, with people reportedly being bussed to different polling stations to cast several ballots. Opposition groups plan to take to Moscow's streets later on Monday in protest of the outcome.

Putin, who is currently Russian prime minister, received almost 64 percent of the vote. His nearest rival, Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party, came a distance second with 17 percent. Voter turnout was estimated to be about 63 percent.

Putin will be inaugurated in May for a six-year term -- increased from the previous four years. He has said he will name the current president, Dmitry Medvedev, as his prime minister, a position Medvedev already held between 2005 and 2008.

In September 2011, Putin and Medvedev announced their long-held intention to swap jobs, sparking outrage among the opposition and alienating liberal members of the middle class. But Sunday's result showed that weeks of protests in Moscow and elsewhere had little effect on Russians' voting intentions.

On Monday, German media commentators mull over Putin's election victory.

The center-left daily **Süddeutsche Zeitung** writes:

"Vladimir Putin has shown that one can both win and lose at the same time. (...) Already on election day, the growing irreconcilability between the state and its critics was apparent. Reports of election fraud by the opposition were immediately trivialized. With ignorance on the one side and outrage on the other, Russia is drifting ever more plainly into a situation where society is divided into Putin opponents and supporters. Only the coming days will reveal how big the divide between the people and the state really is, and whether the Russians will actually be able to come to terms with the result when the smoke clears."

"If not, the only solution would be a fresh parliamentary election, another presidential election or real reforms. But the chances are slim. On the other hand, Russia is too big and its mountain of problems too great to afford such a social division. The decision is in the hands of the Kremlin's chief."

The center-right **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung** writes:

"It is more than questionable whether Putin is the right man to master the challenges Russia faces. The articles he published in the major Russian newspapers in recent weeks contained many correct conclusions about the bad condition Russia is in, and tallied with the assessment given by liberal opponents of the regime. But these analyses, laced with lip service to democratic values, all ended in expansive self-praise and outdated thinking. The hope that Putin will now at last start to implement the democratic reforms he has failed to launch in the last 12 years is naïve."

The conservative daily **Die Welt** writes:

"Even if Putin succeeds himself in the Kremlin, these elections could mark the beginning of the end of the Putin system. It has become obsolete. So far, the Russian social contract rested on the

promise of stability and growing prosperity. This was supported by rising oil prices. Twelve years ago, they stood at \$8 a barrel, while today's prices are 10 times higher."

"Today's Russia has something it never had before: a middle class that wants to be taken seriously and is fed up with corruption. The digital-savvy young generation is curious about the world, especially the West. (...) These people were outraged that Putin and Medvedev shared power among themselves for more than a decade, and the Kremlin is wary of brutal intervention (against them). Putin knows he can not afford to lose this young, cosmopolitan generation."

"We should not demonize Putin's Russia. It is still a brutal land, but since Gorbachev and Yeltsin, it is no longer the Soviet Union. It is also no longer home to the wild experiments of the 1990s. Putin now faces the task of comprehensive modernization. Will he stick to the established system or reform Russia? Tomorrow's Putin will have to be different from yesterday's Putin."

Business daily **Handelsblatt** writes:

Putin's election "is the beginning of a protracted process, and one which presents the new president with difficulties. Putin is not likely to get rid of the system of 'managed democracy' which he himself introduced. As such, one cannot expect major changes. But he will have to address the demands of the dissatisfied middle class to avoid a societal split. Should he fail to do so, the middle classes, who are demanding evolution rather than revolution, will become even more rebellious."

"Russians are no longer satisfied with just stability and growing prosperity, two things which were the backbone of Putin's earlier victories. This time around, he will have to fulfil the myriad promises he made during the campaign: more democracy, less bureaucracy and corruption and a modern economy that produces competitive products and isn't completely reliant on oil and gas. And Russian citizens will pay closer attention to the results than they have in the past."

The **Financial Times Deutschland** writes:

"Despite the recent challenges, the power of the Putin system remains unbroken. And in light of the current reports about electoral manipulation, it is clear what can be expected from Putin's promises of reform in the past few weeks: nothing. Yet despite all the disappointment over the political stalemate in Russia, there are also signs of a new beginning. Opposition to Russia's ruling elite has never been as broad and large as in recent weeks and months. A young, dynamic and creative middle class is slowly maturing, one that is no longer willing to cede economic and political power to a small group in the Kremlin."

"This new civil society is still too small to drive Putin out of office. It will probably still be too small in six years' time, if he runs for a further term as president. Russia has been dominated by

authoritarian thinking and state paternalism for too long for that to happen. (...) But yesterday's election showed that Russia's civil society is slowly but steadily growing. That makes one hopeful for Russia -- despite everything."

The left-leaning **Berliner Zeitung** writes:

"We must not forget that the election was one in name only. There are no alternatives to Putin. None of the approved parties offers what the young, middle class intelligentsia is demanding in the streets, namely modernization. It must of course be assumed that Putin would probably have won the election even without massive vote-rigging. He still has enough supporters, and there are no genuinely dangerous rivals in sight. He has made sure of that over the last 12 years."

"Russia needs to modernize. It must reduce its dependency on raw materials and build a strong industrial base and a modern service sector. Putin had a dozen years for that task, but he failed to achieve that."

"All the studies show that the middle class has abandoned Putin. Not because they have been worse off financially under him, but because he stands in the way of the political progress that Russia needs to get its economy back on its feet. Putin's re-election is the beginning of the end of the Putin system."