Russian presidential elections: Vladimir Putin storms to victory with vast margin, set to rule for anc

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The Russian strongman ran against seven other candidates, but his most vocal critic Alexei Navalny was barred from the ballot for legal reasons and the final outcome was never in doubt.

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Moscow: Vladimir Putin rolled to a crushing re-election victory Sunday for six more years as Russiaâ€™s president, and he told cheering supporters in a triumphant but brief speech that â€œwe are bound for success.â€•

There had been no doubt that Putin would win in his fourth electoral contest; he faced seven minor candidates and his most prominent foe was blocked from the ballot.

His only real challenge was to run up the tally so high that he could claim an indisputable mandate.

With ballots from 80 percent of Russiaâ€™s precincts counted by early Monday, Putin had amassed 76 percent of the vote. Observers and individual voters reported widespread violations including ballot-box stuffing and forced voting, but the claims are unlikely to dilute the power of Russiaâ€™s longest-serving leader since Josef Stalin.

As the embodiment of Russiaâ€™s resurgent power on the world stage, Putin commands immense loyalty among Russians. More than 30,000 crowded into Manezh Square adjacent to the Kremlin in temperatures of minus 10 (15 Fahrenheit) for a victory concert and to await his words.

Putin extolled them for their support â€” â€œI am a member of your teamâ€• â€” and he promised them that â€œwe are bound for success.â€•

Then he left the stage after speaking for less than two minutes, a seemingly perfunctory appearance that encapsulated the electionâ€™s predictability.

Since he took the helm in Russia on New Yearâ€™s Eve 1999 after Boris Yeltsinâ€™s surprise resignation, Putinâ€™s electoral power has centered on stability, a quality cherished by Russians after the chaotic breakup of the Soviet Union and the â€œwild capitalismâ€• of the Yeltsin years.

But that stability has been bolstered by a suppression of dissent, the withering of independent media and the top-down control of politics called â€œmanaged democracy.â€•

There were widespread reports of forced voting Sunday, efforts to make Russia appear to be a robust democracy.

Among them were two election observers in Gorny Shchit, a rural district of Yekaterinburg, who told The Associated Press they saw an unusually high influx of people going to the polls between noon and 2 p.m. A doctor at a hospital in the Ural mountains city told the AP that 2 p.m. was the deadline for health officials to report to their superiors that they had voted.

â€œPeople were coming in all at once, (they) were entering in groups as if a tram has arrived at a stop,â€• said one of the observers, Sergei Krivonogov . The voters were taking pictures of the pocket calendars or leaflets that poll workers

distributed, seemingly as proof of voting, he said.

Other examples from observers and social media included ballot boxes being stuffed with extra ballots in multiple regions; an election official assaulting an observer; CCTV cameras obscured by flags or nets from watching ballot boxes; discrepancies in ballot numbers; last-minute voter registration changes likely designed to boost turnout; and a huge pro-Putin sign in one polling station.

Election officials moved quickly to respond to some of the violations. They suspended the chief of a polling station near Moscow where a ballot-stuffing incident was reported and sealed the ballot box. A man accused of tossing multiple ballots into a box in the far eastern town of Artyom was arrested.

Overall national turnout was expected to be a little more than 60 percent, which would be several points below turnout in Putinâ€™s electoral wins in 2000, 2004 and 2012. He did not run in 2008 because of term limits, but was appointed prime minister, a role in which he was widely seen as leader.

Putinâ€™s most vehement foe, anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny, was barred from running Sunday because he was convicted of fraud in a case widely regarded as politically motivated. Navalny and his supporters had called for an election boycott but the extent of its success could not immediately be gauged.

The election came amid escalating tensions with the West, with reports that Moscow was behind the nerve-agent poisoning this month of a former Russian double agent in Britain and that its internet trolls had waged an extensive campaign to undermine the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Britain and Russia last week announced expulsions of diplomats over the spy case and the U.S. issued new sanctions.

In his first public comments on the poisoning, Putin on Sunday referred to the allegations against Russia as â€œnonsense.â€•

Moscow has denounced both cases as efforts to interfere in the Russian election. But the disputes likely worked in Putinâ€™s favor, reinforcing the official stance that the West is infected with â€œRussophobiaâ€• and determined to undermine both Putin and traditional Russian values.

The election took place on the fourth anniversary of the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, one of the most dramatic manifestations of Putinâ€™s drive to reassert Russiaâ€™s power.

Crimea and Russiaâ€™s subsequent support of separatists in eastern Ukraine led to an array of U.S. and European sanctions that, along with falling oil prices, damaged the Russian economy and slashed the rubleâ€™s value by half. But Putinâ€™s popularity remained strong, apparently buttressed by nationalist pride.

In his next six years, Putin is likely to assert Russiaâ€™s power abroad even more strongly. Just weeks ago, he announced that Russia has developed advanced nuclear weapons capable of evading missile defenses. The Russian military campaign that bolsters the Syrian government is clearly aimed at strengthening Moscowâ€™s foothold in the Middle East, and Russia eagerly eyes any reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula as an economic opportunity.

At home, Putin must face how to groom a successor or devise a strategy to circumvent term limits, how to diversify an economy still dependent on oil and gas, and how to improve medical care and social services in regions far removed from the cosmopolitan glitter of Moscow.

Authorities struggled against voter apathy, putting many of Russiaâ€™s nearly 111 million voters under intense pressure to cast ballots.

Yevgeny, a 43-year-old mechanic voting in central Moscow, said he briefly wondered whether it was worth voting.

â€œBut the answer was easy ... if I want to keep working, I vote,â€• he said, speaking on condition that his last name not be used out of fear his employer â€” the Moscow city government â€” would find out.

First-time voters in Moscow were given free tickets for pop concerts and health authorities were offering free cancer screenings.

Voters appeared to be turning in out in larger numbers Sunday than in the last presidential election in 2012, when Putin faced a serious opposition movement and there were instances of multiple voting, ballot stuffing and coercion.

Navalny, whose group also monitored the vote, dismissed Putinâ€™s challengers on Sundayâ€™s ballot as â€œpuppets.â€• He urged a boycott of the vote and vowed to continue defying the Kremlin with street protests.

Ukraine, insulted by the decision to hold the election on the anniversary of Crimeaâ€™s annexation, refused to let ordinary Russians vote. Ukraine security forces blocked the Russian Embassy in Kiev and consulates elsewhere as the government protested the voting in Crimea, whose annexation is still not internationally recognized.

Ukrainian leaders are also angry over Russian support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, where fighting has killed at least 10,000 people since 2014.

Polls show that most Russians view the takeover of the Black Sea peninsula as a major achievement despite subsequent Western sanctions.

â€œWho am I voting for? Who else?â€• said Putin supporter Andrei Borisov, 70, a retired engineer in Moscow. â€œThe others, itâ€™s a circus.â€•

The Central Election Commission also claimed it had been the target of a hacking attempt from 15 unidentified nations that was deterred by authorities.

- AP