



Russia's March 2012 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications

Jim Nichol

Specialist in Russian and Eurasian Affairs

March 14, 2012

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

R42407

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

Challenges to Russia's democratic development have long been of concern to Congress as it has considered the course of U.S.-Russia cooperation. The Obama Administration has been critical of the apparently flawed Russian presidential election which took place on March 4, 2012, but has called for continued engagement with Russia and newly elected President Vladimir Putin on issues of mutual strategic concern. Some in Congress also have criticized the conduct of the election, but have endorsed continued engagement, while others have called for stepping back and reevaluating the Administration's engagement policy. Congress may consider the implications of another Putin presidency, lagging democratization, and human rights abuses in Russia as it debates possible future foreign assistance and trade legislation and other aspects of U.S.-Russia relations.

Five candidates were able to register for the March 4, 2012, presidential election. Of these, Prime Minister Putin had announced in September 2011 that he intended to switch positions with current President Dmitriy Medvedev, and return to the presidency for a third term. Three of the other four candidates—Communist Party head Gennadiy Zyuganov, Liberal Democratic Party head Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and A Just Russia Party head Sergey Mironov—were nominated by parties with seats in the Duma. The remaining candidate, businessman Mikhail Prokhorov, was self-nominated and was required to gather 2 million signatures to register. Other prospective candidates dropped out or were disqualified on technical grounds by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC). Opposition Yabloko Party head Grigoriy Yavlinskiy was disqualified by the CEC on the grounds that over 5% of the signatures he gathered were invalid. Many critics argued that he was eliminated because he would have been the only *bona fide* opposition candidate on the ballot. Of the registered candidates running against Putin, all but Prokhorov had run in previous presidential elections and lost badly.

According to the final report of the CEC, Putin won 63.6% of 71.8 million votes cast, somewhat less than the 71.3% he had received in his last presidential election in 2004. In their preliminary report, monitors led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the election was well organized but that there were several problems. Although the report did not state outright that the election was “not free and fair,” some of the monitors at a press conference stated that they had not viewed it as free and fair. According to the report, Prime Minister Putin received an advantage in media coverage, and authorities mobilized local officials and resources to garner support for Putin. The OSCE monitors witnessed irregularities in vote-counting in nearly one-third of the 98 polling stations visited and in about 15% of 72 higher-level territorial electoral commissions.

The initial protests after Putin's election by those who view the electoral process as tainted appeared smaller in size and number than after the Duma election. Authorities approved a protest rally in Pushkin Square in central Moscow on March 5, along with Putin victory rallies elsewhere in the city. After some of the protesters allegedly did not disperse after the time for the rally had elapsed, police forcibly intervened and reportedly detained up to 250 demonstrators, including activist Alexey Navalny, who later was released.

Contents

Introduction and Background	1
The Campaign.....	2
Results and Assessments.....	5
Implications for Russia and Putin.....	6
Protest Rallies.....	8
Implications for U.S. Interests and Congressional Concerns	9
Impact on the U.S.-Russia “Reset”	9
Congressional Concerns	11

Tables

Table 1. Presidential Election Results.....	5
---	---

Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	12
---------------------------------	----

Introduction and Background

Challenges to Russia's democratic development have long been of concern to Congress as it has considered the course of U.S.-Russia cooperation. The Obama Administration has been critical of the apparently flawed Russian presidential election which took place on March 4, 2012, but has called for continued engagement with Russia and newly elected President Vladimir Putin on issues of mutual strategic concern. Some in Congress also have criticized the conduct of the election, but have endorsed continued engagement, while others have called for stepping back and reevaluating the Administration's engagement policy. Congress may consider the implications of another Putin presidency, lagging democratization, and human rights abuses in Russia as it debates possible future foreign assistance and trade legislation and other aspects of U.S.-Russia relations.

Former Russian President Vladimir Putin served two elected terms from 2000 to 2008, after which he was required to step down due to a constitutional limit to two *successive* terms. He endorsed his then-First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev as his choice to be the next president. Medvedev was elected by a wide margin in March 2008, and upon taking office nominated Putin to be his prime minister. In September 2011, Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev announced that they would exchange places so that Putin could re-assume the presidency. The two leaders claimed that they had agreed to consider this switch before Medvedev had been elected in 2008.¹ This announcement created a great deal of resentment among many Russians who felt that a backroom deal had been foisted on them. The resentment was mostly low-key at first, but signs included polls showing growing dissatisfaction with Putin and Medvedev.

The trigger for wider open discontent was a December 2011 election to Russia's legislature, the Duma, that was widely viewed by many Russians as not free and fair.² Demonstrations against the election began even before the polls closed, and over the next few weeks, several protests of up to 100,000 or more people were held in Moscow and many other cities, the largest since before the collapse of the Soviet Union over 20 years ago. These protesters demanded that a new Duma election be held, but also called for a scheduled March 4, 2012, presidential election to be free and fair. At first, these protests appeared to shock the Putin government, leading to some arrests, but the government soon decided to permit the protest rallies as a means to "let off steam," and President Medvedev introduced some legislation that he claimed would enhance democratization in Russia in the future.

¹ In an interview on March 1, 2012, Putin claimed that he and Medvedev had revisited the notion of the switch about a year ago, and the two had agreed that Putin had a higher popularity rating so should run for the presidency. Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, "Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets With Editors-in-chief of Leading Foreign Media Outlets," March 2, 2012..

² For background, see CRS Report R42118, *Russia's December 2011 Legislative Election: Outcome and Implications*, by Jim Nichol.

The Campaign

Five candidates were able to register for the March 4, 2012, presidential election. Four of the five candidates—Putin, Gennadiy Zyuganov, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Sergey Mironov—were nominated by parties with seats in the Duma. According to the election rules, other prospective candidates from minor parties not represented in the Duma or self-nominated individuals were required to gather 2 million signatures of support, with no more than 50,000 in each of at least 40 regions nationwide, within about one month. Many analysts have viewed these and many other requirements imposed on prospective minor party and independent candidates as too restrictive and as limiting political participation.³

Of the 17 individuals who initially announced they would run for the presidency, some dropped out and many were disqualified on technical grounds by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), and only three managed to submit signatures. Two out of the three—regional governor Dmitriy Mezentsev and opposition Yabloko Party head Grigoriy Yavlinskiy—were disqualified by the CEC on the grounds that over 5% of their signatures were invalid. The signatures of the third prospective candidate, businessman Mikhail Prokhorov, were deemed valid and he was placed on the ballot. According to some critics, Mezentsev was a “technical candidate,” who was nominated only to ensure that if all other candidates withdrew from the election, Putin would still have an opponent as required under the electoral law. After Prokhorov was registered, however, Mezentsev was no longer needed and he was eliminated as a candidate, these critics claim. Yavlinskiy was deemed ineligible on the grounds that some signatures gathered electronically were not handwritten in *ink* and therefore were invalid. Many observers argued that he was eliminated because he would have been the only *bona fide* opposition candidate on the ballot.⁴

Of the registered candidates, all but Prokhorov had run in previous presidential elections and lost badly. Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy had run several times. While he was speaker of the Federation Council (the upper legislative chamber), Mironov ran in the 2004 presidential election, where he praised Putin's policies. Prokhorov announced his candidacy just two days after a large opposition demonstration on December 10, 2011, raising speculation by some critics that he was urged to run by the government as a candidate who might attract the votes of some of the liberal protesters. According to polling, substantial percentages of prospective voters viewed all these candidates in a negative light and would never vote for them. For instance, over one-quarter of those polled stated that they would never vote for an “oligarch” like Prokhorov (he is said to be the third-richest man in Russia). These negative views greatly hampered the effectiveness of these candidates' campaign efforts, and many voters may well have voted for Putin as the “lesser evil,” according to some observers.

Besides permitting protests “for free elections” as well as opposition presidential candidate meetings, the Medvedev-Putin government launched efforts to appeal to wavering if not disgruntled voters, including by offering opposition figures jobs and by making some changes in

³ *First Statement of the Association Golos on the Results of the Long-Term Election Monitoring of the Local Elections and the Presidential Elections which are Scheduled for 4th March 2012: The Nomination and Registration of the Candidates*, Golos, January 30, 2012. Golos (Voice) is a Russian non-governmental organization founded in 2000 that advocates democratization and monitors elections.

⁴ “Guide to Russia's Presidential Election on 4 March 2012,” *BBC Monitoring*, February 2, 2012; *Moscow Times*, December 15, 2011; Open Source Center, *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), December 14, 2011, Doc. No. CEP-950097.

government postings. Among the latter, Russia's ambassador to NATO, the nationalist Dmitriy Rogozin, was elevated to deputy prime minister in a seeming effort to attract the nationalist vote, according to some observers. Also, the Putin campaign orchestrated large-scale rallies, the most prominent of which was a pro-Putin demonstration on February 4 in Moscow aimed at rivaling the attendance at a "for free elections" rally, and a campaign rally in the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow on February 26, 2012. At this final campaign rally of the Putin campaign, some individuals reportedly had arrived by bus or train after trips lasting more than 24 hours, even though Putin's attendance at the rally was uncertain. The government claimed that over 130,000 supporters attended the rally, although the stadium's capacity is about 84,000.

In addition to these pro-Putin events, a wave of television shows was launched extolling Putin's rule and condemning alleged U.S. and opposition "subversion" against Russia. At the same time, authorities moved to harass and suppress independent vote monitoring groups, the Internet, and certain "old media" newspapers and broadcasters that the opposition relied on.

Putin refused to participate in televised debates with the other candidates, but appeared extensively on television in the guise of carrying out his duties as prime minister. Also, from mid-January through late February, he published seven long articles in major newspapers. These "election manifesto" articles covered such policy issues as ethnicity, the economy, democracy, socioeconomic problems, national security, and foreign policy. In the first overview article, Putin boasted that during his rule, he helped "deliver Russia from the blind alley of civil war, break the back of terrorism, restore the country's territorial integrity and constitutional order, and spark economic revival, giving us a decade distinguished by one of the world's fastest economic growth rates."⁵ In the democracy article, he argued that there was no democracy in Russia in the 1990s, only "anarchy and oligarchy," but that under his rule in the 2000s, democracy had been established. He defined this democracy in terms of the rights of Russians to employment, free healthcare, and education, although he admitted that civil society recently had demanded more political participation. However, he warned against creating a contentious electoral environment of "buffoons" rather than one where "responsible" people are elected, and called for retaining a strong federal government if gubernatorial elections are reinstated. He also called for greater efforts to combat corruption, which he claimed had strengthened when young greedy people had moved into the civil service.⁶ In general, the articles appeared to be a reiteration of existing policies and sentiments, rather than a forum for launching new initiatives, according to many observers.⁷

Besides these efforts, Putin boosted or promised large increases in military and government pay, pensions, and student stipends. These benefits may have made many voters very receptive to his argument that they should elect him in order to preserve their benefits.

A major aspect of the shift in tactics by the Putin campaign involved blaming the United States and the West for the protests. This anti-Americanism aimed to define the election as a patriotic vote for Putin. After Secretary Clinton voiced criticism of the Duma election in early December

⁵ Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, "Russia Muscles Up: The Challenges We Must Rise to Face," January 16, 2012; "Democracy and the Quality of Government," February 6, 2012.

⁶ Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, "Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets With Editors-in-chief of Leading Foreign Media Outlets," March 2, 2012.

⁷ For commentary on the articles, see Pavel Felgenhauer, "Massive Repression of the Prodemocracy Opposition May Begin Next Week," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 1, 2012.

2011, Putin accused her of “giving orders” for the launch of protests. Rogozin even asserted that Secretary Clinton and former Secretary Madeleine Albright wanted to destroy Russia in order to take over Siberia’s mineral resources. At the campaign rally at the Luzhniki stadium on February 23, Putin urged voters “not to look abroad ... and not betray their motherland, but to stay with us, to work for [Russia’s] benefit and its people. And love it the way we do.”⁸ This anti-American theme also was prominent in a number of supposedly non-partisan talk shows and “documentaries” aired on state-owned or controlled television.⁹

Several major Russian polling organizations are owned by the government or receive government contracts, so their objectivity was of concern, according to some observers. In particular, the prominent All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (known by its Russian acronym, VTsIOM), is state-owned. Some critics have argued that VTsIOM’s polls were an announcement of what results the government planned for on election day. The government pointed to the polls as evidence that the results were valid and not due to ballot-box stuffing, according to these critics. They point to Putin’s award of the Order for Services to the Fatherland to VTsIOM after the 2007-2008 election cycle as evidence of this collusion between the government and VTsIOM.¹⁰ On February 27, the last permitted day to release polling results, VTsIOM estimated that Putin would garner nearly 59% of the vote, so that a second round of voting would not be necessary.

During the last few days before the election, the Putin government and campaign made several accusations that opposition politicians and other enemies of Putin were involved in criminal conspiracies. The most sensational was an announcement in late February that Ukrainian police had uncovered a plot by Chechen terrorists to assassinate Putin after the election. Other sensational accusations included those by Putin that oppositionist politicians planned to kill one of their own in order to blame the death on him, and another that oppositionists planned to stuff ballots marked with Putin’s name into ballot boxes in order to declare that the election was illegitimate. The privately owned REN TV showed a program warning that if Putin was not elected, Russia would descend into civil war and destruction within a few months at the hands of the opposition.

In an attempt to convince the public that the election would be free and fair, Prime Minister Putin announced in mid-December 2011 that two webcams would be placed in each of about 94,500 polling places. Most of these were installed. Individuals who pre-registered were permitted to view the voting and vote-counting on-line (the latter after a delay until all polls were closed).

⁸ *Interfax*, December 8, 2011; *CEDR*, February 1, 2012, Doc. No. CEP-41001; February 23, 2012, Doc. No. CEP-950037.

⁹ Some of these programs are discussed in “Facing Hell Without Putin,” *RIA Novosti*, March 2, 2012.

¹⁰ *CEDR*, April 28, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-18001.

Results and Assessments

Table I. Presidential Election Results

Candidate	Nominated by:	Percent of Vote
Vladimir Putin	United Russia Party	63.6
Gennadiy Zyuganov	Communist Party of the Russian Federation	17.18
Mikhail Prokhorov	Self-Nominated	7.98
Vladimir Zhirinovskiy	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	6.22
Sergey Mironov	A Just Russia Party	3.85

Source: Russian Central Electoral Commission, March 7, 2012.

Putin declared victory two hours after the polls closed and after about one-third of polling precincts had reported that he had received a sufficient vote for a first-round win. He and Medvedev hosted a large pre-planned outdoor victory rally and concert in Moscow (the pro-Putin crowds had gathered well before the last polling places in Russia had closed, which ostensibly is illegal). Putin proclaimed that the voters had rebuffed attempts to “break up the state and usurp power.... We proved that no one can impose on us.... We have won in open and honest battle.”¹¹ Even before receiving or reviewing most reports of electoral violations, CEC head Vladimir Churov proclaimed just after the polls closed that only a tiny percentage would prove valid. He also declared that the election was the most “open, fair, transparent and decent presidential campaign” in the world.¹² Zhirinovskiy and Mironov immediately congratulated Putin for what they termed an honest win, but Zyuganov and Prokhorov alleged that electoral irregularities meant that the election was not free and fair. All but Zyuganov met with Putin on March 5, where a discussion of each candidate’s platform proposals took place.

According to the final report of the CEC, Putin won 63.6% of 71.8 million votes cast, somewhat less than the 71.3% he had received in his last presidential election in 2004.¹³ Some of Mironov’s expected supporters instead may have voted for Prokhorov, reducing his result below that gained by his A Just Russia Party in the Duma election. Moscow was the only major city where Putin failed to get over 50% of the vote, even though there may have been a concerted effort to inflate Putin’s vote count in the city, according to some reports.¹⁴ Chechnya continued its tradition of reporting a high turnout (99.6%) and vote (99.8%) for Putin.

Thousands of irregularities were reported by independent Russian activists, including video of individuals allegedly admitting that they had been paid to vote repeatedly, and “hundreds” of buses parked in Moscow that allegedly had carried Putin’s supporters into the city to inflate the voting results there for Putin. The performance of the webcams was uneven. Many were not

¹¹ Nick Morrison, “Russian Presidential Vote: Live Report,” *Agence Presse France*, March 4, 2012.

¹² *Interfax*, March 4, 2012.

¹³ For background, see CRS Report RS22831, *Russia’s March 2008 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications*, by Jim Nichol.

¹⁴ “BBCM Analysis: ‘Carousels’ Run Rings Round Moscow Observers in Russian Poll,” *BBC Monitoring*, March 5, 2012.

focused on the ballot boxes or views were blocked, or they malfunctioned. The independent Golos (Voice) monitoring group reported the heavy use of “carousel voting,” in which buses carried groups that voted at several polling places. Golos also reported the use of absentee ballots in government offices, institutions, and businesses that were gathered up and checked by supervisors to make sure that the employees had voted for Putin. Golos concluded in its preliminary report on the election that although there appeared to be somewhat fewer irregularities than during the Duma election, the presidential election was not free and fair. At a press conference, Golos also stated that its ballot count had given Putin just over 50% of the vote, giving him a win in the first round.¹⁵ Russian physicist Sergey Shpilkin estimated that Putin may actually have received about 58% of the vote, with the official result inflated by ballot box stuffing, by inflating the voter turnout and allocating these votes to Putin, and by other means.¹⁶

In their preliminary report, the 262 monitors led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the election was well organized but that there were several problems. Although the report did not state outright that the election was “not free and fair,” some of the monitors at a press conference stated that they had not viewed it as free and fair.¹⁷ According to the report, Prime Minister Putin received an advantage in media coverage, and authorities mobilized local officials and resources to garner support for Putin. The report also raised concerns that precinct polling place chairpersons generally appeared to belong to the ruling United Russia Party or were state employees. On the positive side, the OSCE reported that the government did not hinder demonstrators calling for fair elections, permitted many monitors at polling places, and installed webcams in most polling places. On election day, the OSCE monitors assessed voting positively overall in the over 1,000 polling places they visited, but witnessed irregularities in vote-counting in nearly one-third of the 98 polling stations visited and in about 15% of 72 higher-level territorial electoral commissions.¹⁸

Implications for Russia and Putin

Putin (and outgoing President Medvedev) face rising dissatisfaction by many Russians with what are viewed as tainted elections, corruption, and other political and human rights problems. According to some Russian sociologists, about one-quarter of the Russian population belongs to the middle class and this portion could grow to one-third by the end of the decade. By this time, a majority of the working population will be middle class, they estimate. These individuals, including many business owners and private-sector employees, want a government that is not corrupt and follows the rule of law, these sociologists report.¹⁹ Putin and other observers have pointed to this growing middle class as major participants in the protests that began after the

¹⁵ *Domestic Monitoring of Elections of the President of the Russian Federation, 4 March 2012: Preliminary Report*, Golos, March 5, 2012; *CEDR*, March 5, 2012, Doc. No. CEP-950073 and Doc. No. CEP-950001; Alexander Kynev, “Election Falsification and its Limits: A Regional Comparison Ahead of the Presidential Elections,” Golos, n.d.

¹⁶ *CEDR*, March 9, 2012, Doc. No. CEP-9001.

¹⁷ Several Russian officials stated that they considered the OSCE preliminary report more “balanced” than the remarks by the OSCE monitors given at the press conference.

¹⁸ OSCE, *International Election Observation, Russian Federation, Presidential Election – 4 March 2012: Statement Of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, March 5, 2012; *Press Release: Russia's Presidential Election Marked by Unequal Campaign Conditions, Active Citizens' Engagement, International Observers Say*, March 5, 2012.

¹⁹ Sergey Belanovskiy, Mikhail Dmitriyev, Svetlana Misikhina, and Tatyana Omelchuk, “Socio-Economic Change and Political Transformation in Russia,” Center for Strategic Research, November 7, 2011.

Duma election. The fact that a large segment of this growing middle class lives in and around Moscow where Putin reportedly garnered a relatively low 47% of the vote should also raise concern for the long-term effectiveness of a new Putin presidency. To some small degree, Putin and Medvedev have become cognizant that this rising middle class increasingly will demand reforms and have already offered some accommodative gestures since the Duma election protests (see below).

A major question is whether a Putin presidency can implement substantial economic and democratic reforms. Some critics have argued that Putin is not attuned to making such reforms, and that he will face rising civil discontent during his third term in office. A few have warned darkly that he could be ousted.²⁰ Most observers discount such a scenario, however, but argue that Russian political and economic institutions and civil society will face substantial strains to adapt to the long-term demands of a modern global economy.²¹

Some observers have speculated that Putin may not follow through on his announced plans to nominate Medvedev as his prime minister. Alternatively, some of Medvedev's supporters have urged him not to become prime minister. Medvedev supporter Igor Yurgens has warned that Medvedev will be "torn apart" by the more conservative Putin appointees in the government, and suggested that the constitution be changed to name Medvedev vice president so that he could maintain more independence from Putin's non-reformist policies.²² Most observers, however, believe that Medvedev will be confirmed as prime minister. On March 1, Putin stressed that he was running for president on the platform that Medvedev would be nominated as prime minister, and that voters would decide democratically on this "tandem."

Some observers suggest that a Prime Minister Medvedev would have substantial authority as a former president, so that the "tandem" would continue to operate much as it has over the past four years. According to this view, Putin would be unlikely to fire Prime Minister Medvedev, at least in the short term. However, prime ministers have been replaced by Putin (and former President Yeltsin) when the economy has declined.

Putin has stated that Medvedev as prime minister would continue to carry out initiatives he launched as president. Medvedev had announced several democratization initiatives in his state of the federation speech on December 22 that he stated were partly spurred by the protests (Putin, in contrast, has asserted that the protests had no bearing on these initiatives). These proposals have been submitted to the legislature for debate. One proposal was to restore gubernatorial elections, which Putin had abolished in 2004. Putin voiced qualms about this initiative, requesting that he retain control over who may run in such elections, and the draft bill reportedly contains such a provision. Another vague proposal by Medvedev was to increase the openness of legislative elections, which some observers had hoped would include the restoration of constituency races and the possibility of self-nominated candidates (Putin had abolished these in 2005). The bill submitted to the Duma, however, called for altering electoral procedures so that voters in 225 new districts would select a party list with identifiable local candidates. Golos researchers have termed

²⁰ Leonid Gozman, Talk, "Psychology of Revolt in Russia Today and the Future," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 27, 2012.

²¹ Philip Hanson, James Nixey, Lilia Shevtsova and Andrew Wood, *Putin Again: Implications for Russia and the West*, Chatham House, February 2012.

²² *Interfax*, February 6, 2012; *CEDR*, February 23, 2012, Doc. No. CEP-46005 and Doc. No. CEP-950109.

these two bills disappointing “propaganda” exercises.²³ Another bill may prove more reformist, however, by greatly reducing the registration requirements for new parties, which may permit many currently unrepresented interests in society to participate in political life.

On March 5, Medvedev directed the prosecutor general to review businessman/oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy’s conviction and that of 30 other prisoners who had been highlighted by opposition politician Boris Nemtsov as “political prisoners” during a meeting with Medvedev on February 20. He also ordered the Prosecutor General to examine the mid-2011 denial of party registration to the Party of People’s Freedom.

Protest Rallies

The initial protests after Putin’s election by those who view the electoral process as tainted appeared smaller in size and number than after the Duma election. Authorities approved a protest rally in Pushkin Square in central Moscow on March 5, along with Putin victory rallies elsewhere in the city. Some youth activists involved in the victory rallies reportedly stated that they were ready to fight against “provocations” by the protesters. After some of the protesters allegedly did not disperse after the time for the rally had elapsed, police forcibly intervened and reportedly detained up to 250 demonstrators, including activists Alexey Navalny, Sergey Udaltsov, and Ilya Yashin, who later were released. At a protest rally in St. Petersburg, reportedly 300 people were detained. Small protest rallies reportedly numbering up to several hundred people occurred in several other cities of Russia. Putin victory rallies reportedly attended by 1,000-7,000 people also were held in several cities across Russia on March 5.

A “for free elections” protest rally was held in Moscow on March 10, attended by 10,000-25,000 people. After the rally some protesters attempted a march and were temporarily detained, including Udaltsov. Some other small protest rallies reportedly numbering 350 or less people took place elsewhere in Russia on the same day. The Communist Party has planned to hold protests against the election in coming weeks. Some observers have discerned a lessening turnout at the protests. Some advocates of “right wing” democratization among the protesters, such as Yavlinskiy, have called for shifting the focus from rallies to organizing new or revitalized opposition political parties. Udaltsov, who represents the “left wing” nationalists among the protesters, has disagreed, however, arguing that unauthorized protests should continue as one means to pressure the authorities. Among other initiatives, Mironov has called for a change in electoral law to again permit party blocs, so that A Just Russia Party could join with the Communist Party to form a new social democratic coalition. Business interests appeared to welcome Prokhorov’s third-place showing and his indication that he would continue a role in politics by forming a party, a proposal that also was endorsed by Putin on March 5. It remains to be seen whether the impetus to create and strengthen civil society organizations will be sustained, particularly if a new Putin administration cracks down on such efforts.

²³ Arkadiy Lyubarev and Alexander Kynev, “A Draft Law, Thrown Together Out of Necessity,” *Golos*, n.d.

Implications for U.S. Interests and Congressional Concerns

The day after the election, the State Department issued a statement that the United States “looks forward to working with the President-elect after ... he is sworn in.” The statement pointed to the results of the preliminary report of the OSCE in stating that the “election had a clear winner with an absolute majority,” but also urged the Russian government to address shortcomings mentioned in the report. The statement hailed the large number of Russian citizens who turned out to monitor the election, held rallies, and otherwise “express[ed] their views peacefully,” and also praised the intentions of the government to improve the political system by re-introducing gubernatorial elections, simplifying party registration, and making other reforms.²⁴ On March 9, 2012, President Obama telephoned President-elect Putin to congratulate him on his electoral victory, and stated that he looked forward to meeting him at Camp David, Maryland, in May 2012 (see below).

Other Western governments appeared to take similar viewpoints. The European Union’s High Representative Catherine Ashton on March 5 “took note” of Putin’s “clear victory,” and praised the significant level of civic engagement in the election. At the same time, she urged Russian authorities to address shortcomings mentioned in the OSCE report. She stated that the “EU looks forward to working with the incoming Russian President” to implement pledges of economic and political reforms.²⁵

Impact on the U.S.-Russia “Reset”

The Administration has pointed to successes of the U.S.-Russia “reset” of relations as including approval by Russia in 2009 for the land and air transit of military supplies to support U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and cooperation in approving a U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolution in 2010 tightening sanctions on Iran, as well as the signing of the START Treaty and the work to gain Russia’s invitation at the end of 2011 to join the World Trade Organization.

It is possible that the anti-Americanism exhibited by Putin during the campaign could put a strain on future cooperation under the U.S.-Russia “reset,” particularly if the opposition protests continue in Russia into the summer and are met by a government crackdown and continuing anti-American statements. Soon after he arrived in Moscow in December 2011, new U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul was accused on state-owned television of providing orders and money to some opposition politicians with whom he had met. However, he has reported that he has had fruitful meetings with Russian officials since this criticism. One positive sign is that various meetings of the working groups of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission have continued in recent weeks.

Another positive sign is that Russian officials have stated that cooperation on the transit of supplies to support U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan will not be linked to other issues in

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Press Statement: Presidential Elections in Russia*, March 5, 2012.

²⁵ The Council of the European Union, *Statement by Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union, on the Presidential Elections in Russian on 4 March 2012*, March 5, 2012.

U.S.-Russia relations. Russia continues to support this transit because U.S. and NATO efforts help stanch terrorist threats aimed at Russia emanating from Afghanistan.

On other U.S.-Russia foreign policy issues, differences have remained or emerged in recent months. The United States, for example, continues to call for Russia to withdraw its troops from occupied areas of Georgia, to which Moscow thus far has failed to respond.

In early 2011, Russia abstained on a UNSC resolution calling for a “no-fly zone” to protect civilians in Libya. The United States and Russia viewed this abstention as support for the U.S.-Russia reset, but almost immediately Russia denounced NATO actions in Libya as aimed at “regime change,” and proclaimed that it would not support another UNSC resolution tightening sanctions on Iran, viewing it as a further “regime change” attempt. Russia has used the same rationale in vetoing UNSC resolutions on Syria. Secretary Clinton termed the February Russian veto “despicable.”²⁶ Russia is a major arms supplier to Syria and has a Mediterranean naval docking facility at Tartus (although it is seldom used). Although the Putin-Medvedev “tandem” defended the veto, it faced Russian domestic as well as international criticism. Members of Congress have criticized Russia’s veto of the Syria resolution; and S.Res. 370, introduced by Senator Robert Casey, condemns Russia for supplying arms to Syria.

On February 24, Putin rejected an argument that U.S.-Russia relations were “cooling off,” stating that “I don’t think we are seeing a cooling.... We have a constant dialogue - we dislike some of the things our colleagues are doing, they don’t like some things we are doing. But in general we have built a partnership over the key issues on the international agenda.”²⁷ Similarly, in an interview with Western media on March 1, Putin praised the U.S.-Russia reset as “useful,” pointing to the START Treaty and WTO accession, and stated that he had warm relations with President Obama, whom he viewed as desiring good U.S.-Russia relations.²⁸ During President Obama’s March 9, 2012, telephone conversation with President-elect Putin, President Obama “highlighted achievements in U.S.-Russia relations over the past three years,” and the two “agreed that the successful reset in relations should be built upon during the coming years.”²⁹

Soon after his inauguration on May 7, Putin is expected to attend the Group of 8 (G-8) industrialized nations meeting at Camp David, Maryland, on May 19-20, just before a NATO summit meeting, scheduled to be held in Chicago. The Administration has suggested that Obama and Putin may hold a summit on the sidelines of the G-8 meeting. Some observers have warned that if European missile defense issues remain contentious at the time of this NATO Summit, Putin may deliver a harsh anti-U.S. speech. On February 24, 2012, one Russian official appeared to urge Putin to indicate readiness before the Camp David and Chicago meetings for “serious talks” on missile defense and nuclear issues with the United States.³⁰ Deputy Foreign Minister

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Press Availability on the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People: Remarks, Hillary Rodham Clinton*, February 24, 2012.

²⁷ Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. *Transcript: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets with Experts in Sarov to Discuss Global Threats to National Security, Strengthening Russia's Defenses and Enhancing the Combat Readiness of its Armed Forces*, February 24, 2012

²⁸ Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets With Editors-in-chief of Leading Foreign Media Outlets,” March 2, 2012; John Stackhouse, “Putin Backs Away from Assad Regime,” *News and Mail*, March 2, 2012; *RIA-Novosti*, March 2, 2012.

²⁹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Readout of the President’s Call with President-Elect Putin*, March 9, 2012.

³⁰ Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. *Transcript: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets with Experts in Sarov to* (continued...)

Sergey Ryabkov indicated on February 29 that a decision on attending the NATO Summit awaited the election and movement on missile defense issues. Russian media reported in early March that a lack of progress on missile defense made it unlikely that a NATO-Russia Council meeting would be held in Chicago, and speculated that Putin may not attend the NATO Summit.

A mostly positive assessment of near-term U.S.-Russia relations was given by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in testimony to Congress in late January on worldwide threats. Clapper suggested that there would be “more continuity than change” in Russian domestic and foreign policy over the next year under a Putin presidency. He projected that Putin would not reverse the course of U.S.-Russian relations, but they might be more “challenging” since Putin has an “instinctive distrust of U.S. intentions.”³¹

Congressional Concerns

Challenges to Russia’s democratic development have long been of concern to Congress as it has considered the course of U.S.-Russia cooperation on matters of mutual strategic interest and as it has monitored problematic human rights cases. Among these concerns, many Members have condemned Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, the death of lawyer Sergey Magnitskiy after being detained and tortured in a Russian prison in 2009, and the re-sentencing of businessman/oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy in 2010 to several more years in prison. Recent legislation includes the Senate and House versions of the Magnitskiy Rule of Law bills, which would impose a visa ban and an asset freeze on human rights abusers, and a provision in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-81), signed into law on December 31, 2011, that calls for a plan to provide defensive weaponry to Georgia.

The Administration’s foreign assistance budget for FY2013 submitted to Congress in February 2012 requests \$52 million for Russia, most of it aimed to continue support for democratization, and the Administration additionally has notified Congress of plans to create a \$50 million fund to further support these efforts. Some observers have suggested that since Putin has condemned such aid as interference in Russia’s internal affairs, he may tighten restrictions on such aid for non-governmental organizations or even ban some aid activities.

Ongoing congressional concerns about democratization, human rights, and trade will continue and may have been heightened by the Russian election outcome. During his trip to Russia in late February 2012 to discuss U.S. trade prospects ahead of hearings on Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus stressed that the growth of U.S. trade and investment would be facilitated by further democratization. Russia’s legislature will give approval for the ratification of WTO accession by mid-2012. Congress may consider whether to grant Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) to Russia and to lift the applicability of the so-called Jackson-Vanik provisions of the Trade Act of 1974 to

(...continued)

Discuss Global Threats to National Security, Strengthening Russia's Defenses and Enhancing the Combat Readiness of its Armed Forces, February 24, 2012.

³¹ U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, January 31, 2012.

Russia (concerning emigration from the former Soviet Union). Russia's human rights and democratization record may well be part of the debate.³²

On March 5, 2012, Representative David Dreier, chairman of the House Democracy Partnership, congratulated Putin on his election victory, but objected to Putin's election night victory speech which appeared to characterize the United States as interfering in Russia's domestic affairs. Representative Dreier stated that the United States was not seeking to dictate to Russia, but suggested that the United States, "a country that has had a 223-year history of democracy, could provide a little bit of advice to a country that is just now beginning to enter its third decade of democracy and obviously has had more than a few challenges." He endorsed an idea that Putin not run again after his third term in office, call a new Duma election, and hold free and fair gubernatorial elections. Dreier also praised Medvedev's request for an examination of the sentence against Khodorkovskiy and suggested that former Russian Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin might make a good choice as prime minister. He stated that the United States wanted a "strong, vibrant, and growing Russia," and good U.S.-Russia relations.³³

Author Contact Information

Jim Nichol
Specialist in Russian and Eurasian Affairs
jnichol@crs.loc.gov, 7-2289

³² See CRS Report R42085, *Russia's Accession to the WTO and Its Implications for the United States*, by William H. Cooper.

³³ *Congressional Record*, March 5, 2012, p. H1137.