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Russia

Putinian continuity

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The presidential elections in Russia in March 2004, which led to the re-election of Vladimir Putin, had little significance in themselves. If one thing was clear, it is that they would in no way change the essential traits of the political regime and its socio-economic policies.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359331.jpg>]

These can be summarized rapidly:

- An unrestrained and profoundly anti-popular neoliberal economic policy, which primarily benefits the oligarchs and corrupt state functionaries, the two groups living in symbiotic relationship, as well as foreign capital;
- The continued deindustrialization of the Russian economy and its strong dependence on the export of raw materials: oil, gas, metals and so on. Hence the absence of any perspective for Russia's emergence from its semi-peripheral status, with all that implies for society on the social, economic and geopolitical levels;
- Widespread corruption and the absence of significant progress towards a state of law; a venal judicial system subjected to the executive (the persecution of selected oligarchs is paradoxically an indication of the absence of a state of law);
- The maintenance of a "regulated democracy", with an executive enjoying quasi-absolute power that excludes the population from any influence on the policies of the government, combined with a tolerance of relatively broad political liberties, as long as they do not threaten the complete freedom of action of the executive. The terrorist policies of the government in Chechnya are there as a reminder of what this regime is capable of when it faces a resistance that it considers threatening.

So far as the oligarchs are concerned, the situation will remain stable. Putin has already shown the predominance of the state over the oligarchs. But this bourgeoisie is in general very content with the situation. It does not seek to directly exercise power. Even the ultra-neoliberals who cry crocodile tears concerning the erosion of the "regulated democracy" (their term) have nothing to reproach Putin about at the level of his economic policy. Obviously, the absence of a state of law creates insecurity in the business world, but a state of law would be still more threatening to them, given the criminal origins of their fortunes and the absolutely essential role that privileged relations with the state play for them in accumulation.

From the point of view of the overwhelming majority of the population, nothing has changed - the standard of living has not improved significantly despite five consecutive years of growth.

The labour code has been revised so that it now reflects the real relationship of forces in the workplaces, that is the absolute power of management. But apart from that, the Putin regime is essentially the same as that established by Yeltsin in October 1993, when he sent the tanks to bombard Parliament. In every election since the Yeltsin coup in 1993, the resources at the disposal of the president or the candidates supported by the regime have been truly disproportionate. Moreover, the results of the elections have been regularly rigged:

- The results of the referendum in December 1993 which consecrated the current political system of an absolute president were falsified. Participation was below the minimum demanded by the new Constitution, drawn up behind closed doors by Yeltsin himself. His coup allowed him to pursue the "shock therapy" promised to the IMF.

– Yeltsin hesitated for a long time before holding the presidential election in 1996. An open letter from a group of big bankers explicitly asked him not to sacrifice Russia on the altar of western democracy, characterized as a "fetish". When it was finally decided to organize the election, he said that he would never allow the communists to return to power. And in reality, according to highly placed sources in the FSB (the former KGB), the Communist candidate would have won.

– The results of the 2000 presidential election were also rigged to allow Putin to win on the first round.

– During the elections in Chechnya in 2002, not even a facade of legality was respected.

It should be stressed that the West supported the Yeltsin coup and that it accepted the results of the presidential elections of 1996 and 2000 as legitimate. If some western leaders now express concern about the fate of democracy it is completely hypocritical. And in any case after the last election, no government has truly questioned the legitimacy of the Putin regime and Putin's economic and international policy is judged to be satisfactory by the West.

Is there really nothing new happening? Yes, the state is progressively strengthening its control over society. But it remains debatable if this has been a qualitative change. "Civil society" (that is the masses but also the possessing class) is so weak that it is hard to tell. In the perspective of history of Russia, its citizens currently enjoy broad freedoms. The problem is that they do not use them to resist this popular regime and show that the latter rests on very weak social and ideological bases. Its growing authoritarianism seeks to compensate for this weakness. The tragedy of Russia is that the capacity of resistance of the people is still weaker than the capacity of the state to oppress it. That could change, perhaps even rapidly. But for the moment, the situation is very stable.