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Russia

Terrorist Attack and Election Pave Way for Putin to Intensify Repression and War

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is already trying to use the horrific terrorist attack that took place Friday 22 March at a Moscow concert hall to stoke his broader imperialist and authoritarian aims, and Russian political theorist Ilya Budraitskis says he fears Putin may soon “compound this tragedy with repression at home and death and destruction abroad.”

The terrorist group Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) has claimed responsibility for the attack, in which a group of terrorists killed and wounded hundreds of people attending a rock concert in suburban Moscow. United States officials have also assigned culpability to ISIS-K for the attack. But President Putin and other Russian officials have made statements that seek to implicate Ukraine in the attack — a rhetorical move designed to deflect attention from his regime’s failure to stop the attack and whip up support for escalation of his imperialist war.

All of this is playing out in the immediate aftermath of the rigged Russian presidential election, in which all opposition candidates were banned, and Putin secured an overwhelming victory. With his new term scheduled to last until 2030, he will become the country’s longest reigning ruler [since Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin](#). Presenting the election as confirmation of popular support for his regime, Putin stands ready to consolidate his reactionary rule within Russia and expand his imperialist war in Ukraine.

In the conversation that follows, Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis shares his thoughts about the terrorist attack, the election, Putin’s rule, the nature of Putin’s regime and the trajectory of the war. Budraitskis is a political theorist and activist from Russia, a visiting scholar with the Program in Critical Theory at the University of California Berkeley, and author of [Dissidents Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics, and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia](#). He is also a member of the editorial board of the Russian socialist website [Posle.media](#).

Ashley Smith: What happened in the horrific terrorist attack in Moscow? Who is behind it? How have the Russian authorities and Putin responded? How will they use the attack in Russian and in their imperialist war on Ukraine?

Ilya Budraitskis: A group of terrorists entered Crocus City, a concert hall in Moscow, armed with machine guns and explosive devices. They attacked the private security guards, shot people in attendance, and set off their devices, triggering a fire and killing at least 133 people and injuring more than 100.

Russian security forces have arrested 11 people, four of them as they tried to escape the country into either Belarus or Ukraine. These four were migrant workers from Tajikistan, a Central Asian Republic and former Soviet republic, and they have confessed to the attack, claiming they were paid \$5,000 to carry it out.

In the immediate aftermath, without a shred of evidence, Russian officials and news outlets blamed Ukraine and even implied [U.S. involvement](#). Putin delayed making any public address clearly in the hopes of finding or manufacturing evidence to use against Ukraine.

When he did [speak on national television](#) 20 hours later, he claimed Ukraine was trying to help the terrorists escape

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from Russia. He also denounced all migrant workers from Central Asia as if they all shared some kind of collective guilt for the attack.

None of these charges are credible. Right after the attack, Ukrainian spokespersons denied any involvement and warned that Putin would blame Ukraine and whip up support for his war. Obviously the attack on migrants is just racism and xenophobia.

As for allegations against the U.S., Washington had actually [informed Russia](#) of an impending attack by ISIS-K, a wing of [ISIS based in Afghanistan](#), that has [targeted Russia](#) for decimating its forces in Syria and backing the country's dictator Bashar al-Assad. Since the attack, Washington has blamed ISIS-K for carrying it out.

That group has also [claimed responsibility](#), and they are likely the culprit. ISIS-K could have reached out through Afghanistan into nearby Tajikistan to secure the services of the attackers.

Putin initially dismissed Washington's warnings as disinformation and fearmongering. But his security forces did arrest several people they accused of being agents of ISIS. But clearly they did not take the warning that seriously, did not root out all of its agents in Moscow, and failed to stop the attack.

Nevertheless, Putin has persisted in trying to implicate Ukraine. Clearly he intends to instrumentalize the attack to justify domestic repression and imperialist war in Ukraine.

That is how he has responded to previous terrorist attacks. For instance, when [Chechen militants seized a school in Beslan](#) and took more than 1,100 hostages, he recklessly raided the school, leading to the death of hundreds, ended democratic elections of regional governors and dramatically escalated the war in Chechnya.

I predict Putin will follow that script today. He will ram through more repressive measures, not just against supposed terrorists but against any dissent against his rule in Russia. Already, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has proposed the restoration of the death penalty.

Putin will likely also whip up patriotic support for a possible new offensive in Ukraine. Thus, he may compound this tragedy with repression at home and death and destruction abroad.

Let's turn to the results of the Russian election. They are, of course, no surprise. Putin won <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2024/3/18/24104857/putins-russia-elections-2024-results-navalny> class="spip_out" rel="external">87 percent and antiwar candidates were banned, how should we understand this result? How much does this reflect popular support for the regime, how much is the result of coerced support and how much of it is the result of passive acquiescence?

The results of the election were indeed unsurprising. They were like all the others in Putin's career; the outcome was preordained and rigged. But there were certain differences this time. He achieved a North Korean level of victory, something he had never done in the past.

In 2000, when he was elected for the first time as president, he won with only [52 percent](#) of the vote. In other elections, he got less than 70 percent, and in his last election in 2018 he garnered [76 percent](#).

To secure 87 percent of the vote, he abandoned even the pretense of democracy. His regime carried out one of the

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-16/how-russian-election-is-rigged-for-vladimir-putin/103595508>

class="spip_out" rel="external">most falsified elections in history, except regime loyalists and their apologists.

The level of falsification is hard to exaggerate. They falsified the results, reporting numbers that did not correspond with real tallies. To enable this rigging of the election, Putin destroyed the entire infrastructure of independent observers.

For example, the regime banned the nongovernmental organization called [Golos \("Voice"\)](#), which had been the main organization that trained independent election observers. Most of its organizers have been jailed or driven out of the country.

As a result, Putin had a free hand to deliver an electoral result entirely at odds with independent pre-election polls. [According to one of those](#), only 50 percent said they intended to vote for Putin.

Another 40 percent said they were not sure who they would vote for and said they would not like to publicly state their preference. So, clearly he does not have 87 percent support of the Russian population.

The important thing to understand about this so-called election is that it was compulsory and supervised. For instance, bosses, especially in the public sector, not only [required their workers to vote](#), but also required them to share a photo of their ballot.

Obviously, the threat was that if they didn't vote for Putin, they would lose their jobs. The election was thus a product of a dystopian combination of an extreme totalitarian dictatorship and surveillance capitalism.

In that sense, it makes little sense to call it an election. Putin is already using it to consolidate his ideological hold over Russian society, presenting the results as confirmation that everyone is lockstep behind his domestic and imperial project.

In the occupied areas of Ukraine, the election was even more [rigged and bizarre](#). In the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, [95 percent supported Putin](#). The occupying forces [manufactured](#) this result at [gunpoint](#).

In perhaps the least believable of all the results, [Putin "won" the election in Avdiivka](#), a city which was just destroyed by the Russian Army, who drove most of its population out. Nevertheless, Putin secured overwhelming support in the city.

Both in Russia and occupied Ukraine, this election was a sham. The results are a product of coercion and systematic falsification.

In the run up to the election, Putin had Alexi Navalny killed to send a signal to both domestic and international opposition to his regime. Nonetheless, his widow, Yulia Navalnaya, called for protests at the ballot box. How big were they? What is their significance?

Navalnaya's call, which I totally supported, was never designed to influence the outcome of the election, which, as I've said, was entirely predetermined by the regime. Instead, the idea was to take advantage of it to mobilize political opposition.

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Remember that all unauthorized public gathering has been banned and any political dissent especially against the war in Ukraine has been met with

Navalnaya took advantage of the regime's mandate for everyone to vote to call for the opposition to turn out at noon, March 17, at the ballot box. The response was surprisingly successful with [significant numbers responding to the call-><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/17/russians-urged-to-disrupt-final-day-of-vladimir-putins-presidential-election>] class="spip_out" rel="external">brutal repression.

The Russian authorities were very afraid of the planned protest. In the days leading up to the election, they required a lot of people to report to police stations and threatened that if they turned out they would be arrested and fined for an illegal mass action.

Moreover, they suppressed information about the call. Remember all opposition websites like [Meduza](#) have been blocked. Nevertheless, according to one independent poll, nearly a quarter of Russians had heard about the action.

Of course, the numbers that did come out were nowhere near that percentage. But the fact that people did turn out and in significant numbers demonstrates opposition to Putin and his imperialist war in Ukraine.

Putin's regime and Russian capitalism have been surprisingly resilient, despite the war, the [attempted coup by Yevgeny Prigozhin](#) and Western sanctions. How do you explain this?

The main reason for Russia's economic stability is its oil industry. It is [not sanctioned](#) and with the price of oil still very high, Russia has been able to maintain economic growth and profitability.

At the same time, the price of the war is very high. Estimates are that the military consumes about [40 percent](#) of the regime's budget. This arms economy can also fuel growth, especially among weapons manufacturers, over the next year or two, but such expenditures are [not sustainable over the long term](#).

This oil and military economy have not changed Putin's neoliberal economic model. There has been some temporary nationalization of companies, but those seized assets have been quickly sold to other owners loyal to the regime.

In that sense, it had nothing to do with nationalization in any traditional sense. It was merely [redistribution of property](#). That has entailed some recomposition of the Russian ruling class, but without changing its highly privatized structure.

Putin has also used the war to secure support from [highly paid professional soldiers](#). They are making far more than regular workers in other public and private sectors.

But this war economy is only sustainable for so long. Eventually its contradictions will undermine its growth and, with that the contradictions of the political system, will reemerge, provoking a new round of instability and crisis.

How will Putin use his rigged electoral victory domestically for his neocolonial war in Ukraine?

Even before the election, Putin boasted in a speech before Parliament that the absolute majority of Russians [supported](#) his "special military operation." So, he will interpret the rigged vote as confirmation of his ideological hold on the Russian people.

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[But this is hubris](#). There is in fact widespread dissatisfaction with the war continuing for much longer, even among Putin supporters. Many of those voted for him thinking, "He started this war, and he should end it."

Putin ignored this sentiment. During the campaign, he never mentioned how he was going to restore peace. Instead, he kept repeating the idea that Russia was in an existential war with the West, and that it must continue it and expand it into other countries.

[A minority of Russian society supports that project](#), probably about 10 to 20 percent. But the majority want peace to be restored. Of course, they don't want Russia to be militarily defeated, but they want this war to end at some point.

These feelings are growing, and they could create a crisis for the regime in the future. But for now, its response is to ignore such feelings or respond to them with campaigns of patriotic indoctrination to whip up support for an expanding war.

Former President Dmitry Medvedev, who is now deputy chairman of the Security Council, made Putin's aims abundantly clear in a [speech](#) a few days before the election. He declared that Russia aimed to "liberate" Odessa, reclaim it as a Russian city and eliminate Ukraine as a nation state.

He went on to propose his own peace formula as an alternative to the one proposed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. He declared that Ukraine is not a real nation but a territory that should be carved up between Russia, Poland and Romania.

Of course, the only way to carry that out is the total conquest and seizure of Ukraine by Russia. That is the opposite of peace. It is a recipe for unending imperialist war and colonial occupation.

Many expect an escalation of the war in Ukraine soon. Will that require greater mobilization of Russian troops? How will the Russian population react? Will it spark any resistance?

It's hard to say whether the Russian authorities will mobilize more Russian troops. Until recently, they have done everything they can to avoid a second wave of mobilization.

Of course, now after the elections, which they claim proved that Russians totally support the war, they may start another mobilization. At the same time, they are smart enough to know that would be very unpopular.

So, for now they are likely to continue paying enormous salaries to so-called volunteer soldiers. But if they intend to carry out a larger-scale offensive, they will have to mobilize conscripts.

They could pair that new mobilization with a promise to bring back those who were drafted in 2022 and deployed to the front lines for the last two years. That might quiet the [growing calls from wives and relatives](#) for those soldiers to come home.

But people will only put up with this war and mobilization for so long. And any returning soldiers will bring with them stories of the slaughterhouse in Ukraine, something destabilizing for the regime.

So, how stable is Putin's regime and Russian capitalism? What are the system's problems and fault lines?

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There is a deep problem in the very political construction of this regime. In one of his [recent speeches](#), Putin betrayed some awareness of this problem. He declared that the old elite forged through the privatization of the Soviet Union's state property is outmoded, and that a new elite needed to be established.

He said that a new, true elite should be recruited from the heroes coming from the front lines. In reality, Putin is building a new elite, not from them, but the children of his narrow circle of friends who control big state corporations and private industry.

Their parents are aging, and Putin knows he faces a problem in the reproduction of a loyal ruling clique and regime. So, he sees their children as his [future loyalists in the state and Russian corporations](#).

That is a sign of a deeply personalistic regime, in which Putin only trusts people he considers friends. But the dictator's number of friends is limited, so the only way to expand it is through recruiting their loyal children into positions in the government bureaucracy and board rooms.

Putin is also integrating his [personal bodyguards into positions in the state](#). As a result, there are a number of governors in various regions of the country who came from his personal security team.

Such methods of regime expansion and consolidation can backfire, creating serious problems for its continued rule. For example, in this arrangement, if people inside the state apparatus want to advance their careers, they eventually hit a dead end, because at the top of the bureaucracy are Putin loyalists appointed by the dictator.

If you are not in that charmed circle, your career advancement is doomed. That can breed apathy and even discontent in the state apparatus, something that can undermine the regime from within.

Of course, the top layer of the state apparatus will support Putin to the last breath, backing the escalation of his imperialist war. But, underneath them, there are layers among whom discontent and opposition can grow. So, the big question both inside and outside the regime is how long this loyalty not just to Putin, but to the system, can last.

Another problem the regime faces is the contradiction that I've described between Putin's imaginary vision of a loyal Russian society united behind him and the real divisions within it, especially those provoked by the war. That contradiction can only hold for so long.

Finally, many on the left are pushing for Ukraine to engage in peace talks and accept a land-for-peace deal with Putin, something they would never demand of Palestinians. What do you think of that argument? Why is it unrealistic? What should the left say about the war, and what should it demand instead?

We should be clear that Putin took the decision to launch this invasion very seriously and is determined not to stop until he achieves his stated goals — the elimination of Ukraine as an independent nation-state and the imposition of a puppet government in Kyiv. If he does not achieve these goals, he will view it as a defeat, something he is not willing to accept.

He views any continued existence of an independent government in Kyiv as a threat to Russia's national security. So, he will not be satisfied with seizing just parts of Ukraine; he wants to seize the entire country as a first step in rebuilding the old Russian Empire.

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He made this clear in a [recent interview](#) on Russian TV in which he was asked about the possibility for peace talks. He bluntly stated that he was not interested in any such talks, that they are motivated only because Ukraine has a lack of arms.

He would only welcome peace talks that secure the imperialist goals of conquest and regime that are the goals of his “special military operation.” So, at this point, he will reject any talks and instead likely escalate the war.

Faced with this unending imperialist war, the left should stand with Ukraine and its struggle for liberation. If Putin succeeds in conquering Ukraine, it will set a precedent for other imperialist powers and states to launch similar wars of colonial conquest.

The international left should defend the right of oppressed nations to self-determination without exception and defend their right to secure arms to defend themselves. Only such solidarity from below can stop the drive toward more and more imperialist war.

25 March 2024

Source: [Truthout](#). Note: This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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