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# A Putin Coronation

*The Kremlin chief gives himself a new six-year term.*

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Vladimir Putin re-ascended to the Russian presidency Sunday, despite three months of unprecedented demonstrations against his heavy-handed rule. The Kremlin's political machine was chastened by the ruling party's poor showing in December's Duma elections and wasn't about to leave any doubt this time. The irony is that this may mean less stability for Russia.

Mr. Putin's victory was arranged long ago. The single serious opposition figure who tried to run, liberal Grigory Yavlinsky, was barred from the ballot. State-controlled television offered the usual fawning coverage. To boost his sagging popularity, Mr. Putin promised about \$160 billion of pork, from higher pensions to free plane tickets to this summer's European soccer championships. He played the anti-American card, blaming Washington for the protests.

Supporters were bused into Moscow to boost Mr. Putin's vote in the capital, where his support has been below 20% in polls. If December's elections are a guide, these loyalists were taken on what the opposition calls a "carrousel" to cast ballots repeatedly at various poll stations. Then the puppet electoral commission will fudge the final numbers behind closed doors.



Enlarge Image

Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin greets his

Some hope that Mr. Putin will show a new interest in reform, if only to divide the opposition, and one early signal will be if any reformers join his cabinet. A draft plan adopted by the Duma last week re-establishes direct elections for governor and eases restrictions on political parties. But will it be implemented now that the election has been won?

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supporters while arriving for a rally at the Manezhnaya Square.

Mr. Putin's long record suggests little willingness to compromise. Security services were out in force Sunday in

Moscow, along with roving packs from Nashi, the Putin youth fan club. While the opposition protests have been peaceful so far, the powers of the Russian state are at Mr. Putin's full disposal if the challenges grow more serious. Last week, he said he may run again in 2018 and rule Russia for 24 years, longer than Brezhnev.

His problem is that about 35% of Russians think the elections are illegitimate and 40% distrust the government. Mr. Putin retains support in the provinces, but even there it has grown shallow. Older, lower- and middle-class Russians are grumbling along with young, Internet-savvy urbanites.

The Putin era has floated on high oil prices, but a Citibank study says the Kremlin needs a price of \$150 a barrel to finance its current costs and electoral promises. Russia needs more investment, foreign and domestic, but its disdain for the rule of the law makes that unlikely. As in the troubled 1990s, capital and people are fleeing Russia again, and its main markets in Europe are growing slowly, if at all.

President Obama gambled that a "reset" of relations with Russia would lead to more global cooperation, but Mr. Putin has resisted serious sanctions on Iran, propped up Syria's tottering dictator and threatened to aim missiles at Europe if U.S. missile defenses are deployed against Iran. Mr. Putin's lack of real democratic legitimacy means he's likely to keep pressing this Great Russia nationalism.

The anti-Putin protests are the most promising Russian news in years, but Sunday's faux-election shows the transition to democracy has a long way to go.

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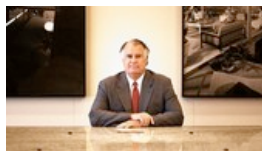
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