

Extra Feature Story

Russian President Putin's Power Grab Questioned

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's power solidified this week when his supporters won control of the parliament in elections marred by reports of intimidation, fraud and harassment.

Election officials said on Dec. 3 that 393 seats in the 450-seat parliament went to parties that are supportive of Putin.

Putin's party, United Russia, won 315 seats. Despite criticism by opposition party leaders and foreign election observers that the election was not fair, Putin called it an "indication of trust" from the Russian people.

"The vote affirmed the main idea: that Vladimir Putin is a national leader, that the people support his course, and this course will continue," United Russia's leader, Boris Gryzlov, told reporters.

Questions about the result

But European election watchers reported numerous cases of intimidation, fraud, multiple ballots and harassment.

In the southern region of Chechnya, where the United Party got 99.36 percent of the vote with turnout of 99.5 percent, witnesses reported seeing election authorities filling out ballots, reported the Associated Press.

Kimmo Kiljunen, vice president of the Office of Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, told the AP the elections were problematic.

"There was the strange situation that the executive branch almost chose the legislative branch," Kiljunen said. "It is supposed to be the other way round."

Several European Union countries spoke out against the election and Germany called the election "neither free, fair nor democratic."

President Bush told reporters he expressed his concerns directly to Putin.

"I said we were sincere in our expressions of concern about the elections," Bush said.

Even before the election took place, White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe said he was concerned about the bias of state-owned media in favor of Putin's supporters, and a lack of opportunity for opposition parties.

Putin opponent and former chess grand champion, Garry Kasparov, who was recently jailed for five days after leading a protest, had the strongest words for Putin.

"The fact is that they are not just rigging the vote, they are raping the democratic system. The government is wanting to use this genetic fear that had been accumulated over decades in the Soviet Union, telling people you cannot hide from us and that's why they used every dirty trick in the book," he told reporters.

Putin's political power

Putin is set to leave office next year, the end of his two constitutionally-allowed terms. In November, Putin said a victory for his party in the election would mean he has a "moral" right to keep a political influence in the Kremlin after he leaves office.

The popularity of United Russia indicates that the next president will likely be from the party, but how large a role Putin will continue to play in Russian politics remains to be seen.

His supporters in the parliament could give him political sway, and he has a big enough majority that he could influence changes to the constitution and may use his new mandate to change the law and remain in office, reported the BBC.

Putin was also quoted by Voice of America in October saying that it was "realistic" that he might become Russia's prime minister.

Putin's role in Russia

Putin has been a popular leader in Russia and is credited with instituting economic reforms that have helped the country stabilize and take on a more prominent role in international politics.

At the same time, he has cracked down on his opponents and forced TV stations critical of his policies off the air.

And although President Bush once called Putin a personal friend "with a good heart," relations have since grown testy.

Just days before the election, Putin angered the U.S. by suspending Russia's participation in an arms treaty that restricted Russian military presence in Europe. The pact suspension came in response to U.S. plans to create a missile defense system in Eastern Europe as a safeguard against Iran.

"On the one hand you have retreat from democracy," Ariel Cohen, the senior Russia expert at the Heritage Foundation, told the Washington

-- **Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra**

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