News



Russian incumbent President Vladimir Putin, who was declared winner of the March 15-17, 2024, presidential election by the country's electoral commission, is seen on screens on the stage as he attends a March 18 rally in Red Square in central Moscow marking the 10th anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters)



Jonathan Luxmoore

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Moscow — March 20, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A senior priest in Russia has said he fears uncertain conditions for local Catholics after March 15-17 presidential elections, in which Vladimir Putin claimed a landslide victory after the forced elimination of effective opponents.

"Catholic preferences varied with the rest of the population — some cast protest votes while others voted for Putin," said Jesuit Father Stephan Lipke, secretary-general of the Russian bishops' conference.

"Small minorities often find it easier to live under an authoritarian ruler who's not against them and may even favor them, than under a democratic system where resentments and hatreds can find expression. The problem is we don't know if this is true stability, or how long it may last," he added.

The Moscow-based priest spoke after official results awarded Putin, in power for 24 years, a fifth term as president.

In an OSV News interview, Lipke said all religious denominations had been asked by the Russian government, as before previous elections, to remind their members to vote.

He added that the bishops' conference had duly called on Catholics to "remember their civic duty, guided entirely by their conscience," in a March 1 communique, while making efforts to ensure the church was not "identified with any one group."

"For now, we're allowed to be neutral — and since there was no boycott movement this time, it was easier to ask people to participate," Lipke told OSV News.

"While many see it as their duty to vote, or do so under official encouragement, the availability of online voting may also have diminished the meaning of

participation — making this just another online activity."

Russia's electoral commission said March 18 Putin had won a record 87.29% of votes, far outstripping three Kremlin-approved alternative candidates to retain power until 2030. Western governments condemned electoral violations and the suppression of opposition in the three-day ballot, which also was said to have given Putin over 90% of support in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

However, Putin was congratulated by Belarus and Kazakhstan, as well as by China, North Korea and India, while the head of Russia's Orthodox church said voters had "once again expressed confidence" in his "tireless work for the Fatherland."

In his March 18 message, Patriarch Kirill said Putin had made "fateful decisions" for strengthening "the power of the Russian state" and assuring "a peaceful and prosperous life," adding that Orthodox leaders counted on close ties in maintaining "traditional moral values, spiritual enlightenment and patriotic education."

Meanwhile, Russia's RIA Novosti news agency reported the pope also had congratulated Putin, after receiving a laudatory message from the Russian ruler on the March 13 anniversary of his own election, but the Vatican March 18 denied the pope had offered Putin any congratulations.

In his OSV News interview, Lipke said he had not heard about any post-election message from the pope, adding that Russia's Catholic bishops would "follow tradition" by praying for the country on Putin's inauguration day.

Advertisement

He added that Catholics were now physically safer than under the 1991-1999 presidency of Boris Yeltsin, when churches and communities were sometimes threatened and attacked, but he said anti-Catholic hostility had been stoked after a Dec. 18 Vatican declaration allowing Catholic priests to bless a same-sex or other unmarried couple.

"Most people want stability, so many prefer Putin to certain alternatives — but true stability also needs sound ways of resolving conflicts, and we don't have these here," the bishops' secretary-general said.

"Pressure is also growing for ideological conformity, so we don't know what will happen in future," he said.

In a March 17 victory speech, Putin said the result indicated that all citizens, "regardless of religious and ethnic affiliation," felt "like a single Russian family," and vowed that Russia's "grandiose goals" would be achieved.

However, the voting was marred by Ukrainian drone attacks and reported incursions by pro-Ukrainian armed groups in Russia's Kursk and Belgorod regions, as well as by incidents of arson and sabotage at some polling stations.

Meanwhile, churches in Ukraine branded the election a farce and said Putin had "self-appointed himself the winner," despite being indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in March 2023.

They added that Christians, Muslims, Jews and other "people of living faith" had fallen victims to his regime, and said "shameful footage" had shown of "happy residents" voting in Ukraine's occupied territories after their relatives were killed and their homes destroyed.

"We call on our brothers and sisters around the world to appeal to their respective governments not to be neutral and to unreservedly condemn this regime that seeks to stifle peace throughout the world and poses a threat to all humanity," the Pan-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, made up of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders, as well as Jews and Muslims, said in a March 18 declaration.

"On these 'elections' weighs the weight of the blood of innocent people, the sin of murder, the deceit of lies and the mark of the thief," the Pan-Ukrainian council said.

Lipke said Putin's appeal to values and emotions had attracted "little interest" among ordinary Russians.

However, he added that Russia's worsening confrontation with Western countries was causing concern in the Catholic Church, which depended on international links.

"It's important for us to maintain good relations with Catholics everywhere in the world, and especially with Rome — the harder this becomes, the more difficulties we experience," the bishops' conference secretary-general told OSV News.

"A shift is also underway as our bishops try to recruit more priests from Latin America, Vietnam and other regions rather than from Europe. But this is also posing problems, since it's predominantly priests from Europe who know the language and can cope here."

Russia's Italian-born Archbishop Paolo Pezzi, who heads the Moscow-based Mother of God archdiocese, celebrated Mass March 16 "for peace in the Holy Land and Ukraine," according to the church's website, but made no reference to elections in his Sunday homily March 17.