

Russia's 2024 presidential election

What is at stake and what is not

SUMMARY

On 15-17 March 2024, more than two years into the unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression on Ukraine, and one month after the sudden death in custody of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Russia will hold its presidential election. Over 110 million Russian citizens, including more than 6 million living in Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia, are invited to take part in what is largely seen as a carefully staged legitimisation ritual for Vladimir Putin's reappointment to a fifth term in office, until 2030.

Putin has been in power, as either president or prime minister, since the last day of 1999; and Russia has been at war for 19 of his 24 years at the helm. The constitutional changes of 2020 allowed Putin to stand for a fifth term, and possibly for a sixth term in 2030. He is running for re-election without any meaningful opposition, after barring the two anti-war candidates who stood for election despite the restrictions, and against a backdrop of a virtually total closure of the civic space, draconian repression of public dissent and suppressed freedom of expression.

The reappointment of Vladimir Putin seems inexorable. The objective of the Kremlin, however, is not just victory, but a landslide result, both in turnout and percentage of votes. This would legitimise Putin's legacy and his war of aggression, relegating the remaining opposition to an even more marginalised role, and allowing Putin to implement, unchecked, his vision for the next six years.

Recent changes to Russia's electoral laws make it virtually impossible to conduct any meaningful monitoring, and have significantly restricted the role of the media. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe will not be present, as was previously the case with the September 2021 parliamentary elections. A number of civil society organisations and personalities have called on the international community not to recognise the results as legitimate; this demand was also made by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in October 2023.



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Russia's presidential election: The practicalities

Timing

The date for the 2024 Russian presidential election was fixed as 17 March 2024, by a unanimous [vote](#) of the Russian Federation Council (upper house of parliament) on 7 December 2023. Using its prerogatives, the Central Election Commission decided that the vote would take place over three days, on 15-17 March, making it the first-ever three-day presidential election in Russian history.

Electorate

The total [number](#) of eligible voters, according to the Central Election Commission (CEC), is 114.2 million, of whom 112.3 million are living in Russia, and 1.89 million abroad. The CEC has included in the register 1.85 million voters in the temporarily occupied territories of Crimea and Sevastopol, as well as 4.56 million [voters](#) in four other temporarily occupied territories: Donetsk (1.97 million), Luhansk (1.65 million), Zaporizhzhia (470 342), and Kherson (468 472). Voters registered in temporarily occupied territories (6.36 million) represent 5.6% of the electorate.

In its [resolution](#) of 29 February 2024, the European Parliament explicitly 'condemns Russia's intention to conduct presidential elections in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine on 15-17 March 2024 and underlines that it will not recognise the results of these illegal elections'.

Candidates allowed to stand

Four candidates have been allowed to register in the ballot.

- **Incumbent president Vladimir Putin**, registered as an independent candidate, but endorsed by the pro-government majority party, [United Russia](#), and by the party [Just Russia - Patriots - for Truth](#), is standing for his fifth term in office. Putin, aged 71 and in power as president or prime minister since 2000, can stand for a fifth term, and possibly a sixth term, thanks to substantial [constitutional amendments](#) introduced in 2020 and hastily approved by referendum.
- **Vladislav Davankov** was nominated by the [New People](#) party.
- **Leonid Slutsky** was nominated by the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia – [LDPR](#).
- **Nikolay Kharitonov** was nominated by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – [CPRF](#).

All three candidates presented as alternatives to Putin are part of the '[systemic opposition](#)' (i.e. with representation in the State Duma – see Table 1 – and, therefore, tolerated by and supportive of the system). They have explicitly supported the war of aggression against Ukraine, and Putin's policies more generally. All four candidates are currently under EU [sanctions](#).

The Council of Europe Venice Commission [concluded](#) in 2021 that Russia's 2020 constitutional amendments, including the term limit waiver for the incumbent president, contradict both the Russian Constitution and international legal principles. Taking these conclusions into account, as well as the [erosion of democracy](#) in Russia, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a resolution on [13 October 2023](#) calling 'on the member states of the Council of Europe to recognise Vladimir Putin as illegitimate after the end of his current presidential term and to cease all contact with him, except for humanitarian contact and in the pursuit of peace' (see below for more precise information).

On 17 March 2023, Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court (ICC) [issued arrest warrants](#) for Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights. Both are allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of the unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation.

Table 1 – Composition of the Russian State Duma (the Parliament's lower chamber), after the September 2021 elections¹

Party	Number of State Duma members	Chair / Secretary-general
United Russia	324	Dmitriy Medvedev
Communist Party	57	Gennady Zyuganov
A Just Russia - Patriots - for Truth	27	Sergey Mironov
Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)	23	Leonid Slutsky
New People	15	Aleksey Nechaev
Non-faction members	2	
Vacant seats	2	
Total number of State Duma members	450	

Source: [State Duma of the Russian Federation](#).

Candidates not allowed to stand

Two anti-war candidates have not been allowed to run in the ballot.

- **Yekaterina Duntsova**, journalist, running as an independent candidate on an anti-war platform, was [barred](#) at the first stage of the registration process in December 2023, on account of [alleged](#) irregularities in her registration dossier.
- **Boris Nadezhdin**, former State Duma member and municipal politician, was nominated by the [Civic Initiative](#) party. He [stated](#) on national television that the war had been 'a disastrous mistake', and pledged in his [manifesto](#) to end the military intervention (not specifying on what terms) and to focus on Russia's internal problems, promising an amnesty for political prisoners. He was later [endorsed](#) by Duntsova, who pledged to work for his campaign, and by [other opposition members](#) in exile.

When Nadezhdin's candidature successfully passed the first stage in the registration, some [analysts](#) believed that he was destined to fulfil the role of '[spoiler candidate](#)' previously played by alternative candidates in past elections. These candidates are allowed, or even encouraged, by the Kremlin to stand while other, more popular and potentially more dangerous candidates are barred, in order to safely channel a fraction of urban liberal voters, and thus demonstrate their marginal role, while preserving the election's democratic facade. That was, [opposition](#) critics believed, the role played by [Ksenia Sobchak](#) and [Mikhail Prokhorov](#) in 2018 and 2012, respectively.

Unexpectedly, across Russian cities and abroad, masses of people [queued](#) to enable Nadezhdin to collect the additional 100 000 signatures necessary to finalise the registration, [altering](#) the otherwise uneventful electoral campaign staged by the Kremlin. The Election Commission [rapidly](#) disqualified Nadezhdin's candidature, claiming that a number of the signatures were invalid. Nadezhdin [refrained](#) from calling his followers to protest on the streets, but appealed the decision. When the

Supreme Court [upheld](#) the decision, Nadezhdin [declared](#) that he would complain to the presidium of the Supreme Court and, eventually, to the Constitutional Court.

The rules concerning signature collection and verification have recently been [changed](#), making it more difficult to collect signatures and easier to invalidate them. [More specifically](#), voters must write on the signature list not only their signature and the date, as before, but also their surname, first name and patronymic, extending the grounds for signature invalidation by handwriting experts.

Voting procedures

According to [Golos](#), a prominent Russian independent vote-monitoring group, [labelled](#) a 'foreign agent' by Russian authorities,² a [number of factors](#) will make this election even less transparent, harder to monitor and more subject to manipulation than previous ones.

- Using its prerogatives, the Central Election Commission has decided that the vote will take place **over three days**, from 15 to 17 March, making this the first-ever three-day presidential election in Russian history. This decision poses obvious additional challenges for potential observers.
- Ad hoc administrative measures have been taken to enable **voting in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories** of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, where Russia does not have [full control](#) of the territory, and despite them being currently under [martial law](#). Considered 'hard-to-reach areas', both [early voting](#) and voting outside the voting premises is allowed in these territories, as well as in other remote territories of the Russian Federation, including by means of house-by-house [mobile voting units](#). The total number of eligible voters in these four temporarily occupied territories, according to Russian [official sources](#), is 4.56 million (i.e. 4 % of eligible voters).
- **Electronic voting** (referred to as the DEG – digital election system) will [apply](#) in 29 regions of the Russian Federation, inhabited by at least 38 million voters (i.e. one third of the electorate).³ This voting method, already tested during the September 2023 Russian regional elections, proved virtually [impossible](#) to monitor. Furthermore, the Kremlin has already [announced](#) that it will not be publishing the breakdown of the electronic voting results by voting district.
- Changes to the election observation rules [introduced](#) in 2022 and 2023 have restricted the space for **independent election monitoring** significantly, especially at district level. Contrary to previous elections, campaign participants can no longer appoint observer members of election commissions, and candidate proxies (representatives) will [not be able](#) to observe the counting of votes or see the voting results at polling stations.
- The presence of **media representatives** at election commission meetings, during vote counting and when the results of the voting are established, is [restricted](#) to journalists with full-time permanent contracts with registered media outlets, eliminating the possibility for free-lancers or independent journalists to fulfil this role.

The Russian Federation [decided](#) **not to invite observers** from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to the 17 March 2024 presidential election, a decision considered deeply regrettable by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA).

The ODIHR engaged in consultations with the Russian Federation as early as September 2023 to agree on the dates for the deployment of a pre-election needs assessment mission. Following the [2021 parliamentary elections](#), when no OSCE observers were deployed following major limitations imposed by the Russian Federation authorities, the presidential vote on 17 March 2024 will be the **second time** in a row that the OSCE has been unable to observe elections in the country.

All OSCE participating states have [committed](#) to invite observers from other OSCE participating states and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to observe, and to follow up swiftly on ODIHR election assessments and recommendations.

Instead, Russia has invited [observers](#) from the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Member Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (IPA-CIS), which recently [monitored](#) the parliamentary elections in Belarus.

Presidential election results: What is at stake and what is not

More than a victory

The victory of incumbent president Vladimir Putin in the 17 March 2024 election, and his inauguration – scheduled for 7 May 2024, setting him up for a fifth six-year term, seems [inexorable](#). This sense of the inevitability of Putin's reappointment as 'the candidate of the people' and the 'leader of the nation' has [permeated](#) the non-campaign staged by Kremlin political strategists since the announcement of the election date.

However, the benchmark set by the Kremlin for this election is not just a victory, but an indisputable [landslide victory](#), both in turnout and percentage of votes. In the 2018 presidential elections, Putin won 76.7 % of the vote with a 67.5 % turnout. The minimum benchmark for the Kremlin in 2024 would be, at the least, to improve on these results (80 % of the vote and 70 % turnout). The maximalist benchmark was [described](#) by Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesman, one year ahead of the election: 'Mr Putin will be re-elected next year with more than 90 per cent of the vote'.

The ultimate goal of the exercise is therefore to [legitimise](#) Putin's [legacy](#) and Putin's war of aggression by popular plebiscite, relegating the remaining opposition to an even more marginalised role, and enabling Putin to implement his [vision](#) for the next six years, unchecked.

[Recent](#) polls by state-owned polling company [Public Opinion Foundation](#) show that over 80 % of voters intend to participate in the election, and 72 % of them intend to support Putin. The same poll, conducted a few days later, [showed](#) that support for Vladimir Putin had increased to as much as 82 % of all voters, with an expected turnout of 71 %.

Meanwhile, other polls by independent polling companies such as [Russian Field](#) and [Levada](#) show that less than 60 % believe that Putin represents their interests. According to the Russian Field poll, 23 % of the respondents believe that the elections will not be fair, whereas 66 % believe they will.

Elections in the temporarily occupied territories

According to expert [analysis](#) by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC), the presidential election will be [more consequential](#) in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, not fully controlled by the Russian Federation and under martial law. The experts maintain that the very process of holding a second election in these territories, after the September 2023 regional elections, is a display of state control and force by

Russia. Local leaders and institutions will be placed under pressure and will compete among themselves to show case record levels of participation and support.

To this end, they can utilise every [tool](#) available for the 'hard-to-reach areas', including early voting and mobile house-to-house voting units. Furthermore, for these territories, both Russian and [Ukrainian](#) ID documentation will be admitted to cast a vote. GCMC argues that this process is a further step towards political consolidation of Russia's military occupation. In this regard, Russia's Federation Council chair Valentina Matvienko has [declared](#) that the inclusion of these 'new regions' in the presidential election is the culmination of their unification with Russia.

Is there any resistance?

In her [first report](#) (September 2023), United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Russia [Maria Katzarova](#) – appointed on 4 April 2023 – painted a grim picture in which any dissent is silenced and political mobilisation is virtually impossible. 'The current state policy of criminalising any actual or perceived dissent is a culmination of incremental and calculated restrictions on human rights in Russia over the past two decades', resulting in the 'effective closure of the civic space, silencing of public dissent and independent media', the report says. The report notes, furthermore, the 'persistent use of torture and ill-treatment'.

The [EIU Democracy Index 2023](#) characterises Russia as an 'authoritarian regime', ranking 144th out of 167 countries, below Nicaragua, Venezuela and Niger. Russia's media freedom ranking in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) fell nine places after its invasion of Ukraine, to 167th out of 180, with the situation described as 'very serious'.

Nearly [20 000](#) people were detained between February 2022 and August 2023 for participating in mainly anti-war protests, and in 663 cases they face criminal charges. In February 2024, Putin [signed](#) a law allowing authorities to confiscate the assets of those convicted of criticising the Kremlin's Ukraine offensive.

The [sudden death](#) of political activist and Sakharov Prize laureate Alexei Navalny on 16 February 2024 in the maximum-security Russian penal colony where he was serving a draconian jail sentence, has shone a new spotlight on the conditions of political prisoners jailed in Russia. According to [OVD-Info](#), there are currently over 1 000 political prisoners in Russia, although the organisation Memorial [documents](#) a smaller number (around 700). They include [Vladimir Kara-Murza](#) (sentenced to the longest term, 25 years), [Ilya Yashin](#), [Alexei Gorinov](#), [Dmitry Ivanov](#), [Ioann Kurmoyarov](#), [Viktoria Petrova](#), [Maria Ponomarenko](#), [Aleksandra Skochilenko](#), [Dmitry Talantov](#), [Yuri Dmitriev](#), [Lilia Chanyшева](#), [Ksenia Fadeeva](#), [Ivan Safronov](#), and [Oleg Orlov](#).⁴

Following the death of Alexei Navalny, spontaneous assemblies and solo pickets took place all over Russia over four consecutive days, and [thousands](#) gathered in Moscow to attend his funeral, defying the Kremlin's warning of arrests. According to OVD-Info at least [400 protesters](#) were arrested in 39 cities during these four days of protest and subsequent mourning ceremonies.

Under these extremely restrictive conditions, Navalny's [Anti-Corruption Foundation](#) launched the protest campaign Noon Against Putin ([#ПолденьПротивПутина](#)), a call to all anti-Putin and/or anti-war citizens to gather peacefully at polling stations at 12 noon on 17 March, to mark their disapproval of the war and the government. Several organisations and personalities have added their names and videos to the platform supporting the initiative, seen as the only safe act of opposition when voters are offered a choice without a choice.

Legitimacy in question

The Council of Europe Venice Commission [concluded](#) in 2021 that Russia's 2020 constitutional amendments, including the term limit waiver for the incumbent president, contradict both the Russian Constitution and international legal principles, such as the principle of the separation of powers, and affect the core element of judicial independence, representing a danger to the rule of

law in the Russian Federation. Embracing these conclusions, the resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted on [13 October 2023](#), signals that 'the overwhelming power of the president resulting from the extremely long term in office combined with the lack of any checks and balances' has turned the Russian Federation' into a '[de facto dictatorship](#)', constituting 'a threat to international peace and security', as 'the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine shows'. The Assembly 'calls on the member states of the Council of Europe to recognise Vladimir Putin as illegitimate after the end of his current presidential term and to cease all contact with him, except for humanitarian contact and in the pursuit of peace'.

A number of civil society organisations and personalities have requested that the international community not recognise Vladimir Putin as the legitimate president of the Russian Federation after the March 2024 elections, through an ongoing petition promoted by the [Russian Anti-War Committee](#) and the [Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces](#).

The petition echoes the argument laid down by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its [resolution](#) of 13 October 2023, among other points.

Representatives of Russian pro-democracy organisations have [argued](#) that international legitimacy matters, for Putin himself, for the ruling elite and for the Russian people. These arguments were further developed during the [debate with the Russian opposition](#) on the 2024 presidential election, organised in the European Parliament on 14 February 2024.

The European Parliament, in its 29 February 2024 [resolution](#), explicitly condemned 'Russia's intention to conduct presidential elections in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine on 15-17 March 2024' and underlined that it would 'not recognise the results of these illegal elections'.

Already in December 2023, the EU High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, Josep Borrell issued a [declaration](#) 'on the intention to hold presidential elections in the temporarily occupied territories', stating that 'the EU will never recognise the holding of Russia's so-called 'elections' or their results in the territories of Ukraine ... that Russia has temporarily occupied in blatant violation of international law', and that Russia's political leadership and those involved in organising the elections would 'face consequences of these illegal actions'. The statement reiterates that 'Crimea, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk are Ukraine. Russia must immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its troops and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders'.

MAIN REFERENCES

Kolesnikov A., '[Putin's War Party](#)', *Foreign Affairs*, December 2023.

Golos (Голос), [Key changes in Russian Presidential Election Laws: 2018 vs. 2024](#), (January 2024).

Milov V., [Why Russia's Presidential elections don't matter, and why they still do](#), Free Russia Foundation, February 2024.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Numerous irregularities were [denounced](#) before and during September 2021 parliamentary elections, where observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE – were not present.
- ² The co-chair of [Golos](#), Grigory Melkonyants, was [detained](#) in August before the regional elections, accused of cooperating with an 'undesirable organisation'. In December, a Moscow court [ruled](#) to keep him in prison until mid-April 2024.
- ³ The figure of 38 million voters was announced by the CEC. However, according to Golos, the total figure of voters registered in the 29 regions amounts to 48 million.
- ⁴ Oleg Orlov, aged 70, is one of the leaders of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Sakharov Prize-winning human rights organisation Memorial. Just a few days after Navalny's death, he was [sentenced](#) to two and a half years in jail for denouncing the war in Ukraine. He is formally accused of discrediting the Russian army. Orlov had already been tried and convicted in October, when a court fined him 150 000 rubles (approximately €1 500). However, prosecutors claimed the punishment – significantly milder than some long custodial sentences for criticising the war – was too lenient and [successfully](#) appealed for a new trial.

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