

The 2024 Russian presidential election

What you need to know:

- **The three-day election**¹ of the Russian president took place **from 15 to 17 March**, Putin's **fifth** in total. Putin was declared the winner by the electoral authorities with a result of **87.28%** (2018: 76.69%) and a voter turnout of **74.22%** (2018: 67.54%). This re-election, which was no longer planned, was made possible by an amendment to the constitution in 2020. Putin's previous term of office has been "nullified" and he can remain in office until 2036, i.e. for two more terms, each lasting 6 years².

- Compared to the other ballots in his **25-year reign**, this is the most **heavily manipulated vote**: with an **unusually high final result in Putin's favour**, the shortest ballot paper, only no-names as "opposing candidates", the greatest use of electronic voting systems and the highest level of repression in recent Russian history. There is de facto **wartime censorship**, large parts of the media landscape are silent or in exile, well-known opposition figures are dead (Nemtsov, Navalny), in prison (Kara-Mursa, Yashin, etc.) or abroad (Khodorkovsky, Navalnaya, Kasparov, Gudkov, etc.).

- With the exception of **a few incidents** at polling stations (ink throwing, arson, Molotov cocktails), the vote went off without any major disruptions and is therefore considered a success by the Kremlin. Even the **intensification of Ukrainian drone attacks** and attempts at a media-effective operation by Russian volunteer units affiliated with the Ukrainian army did not lead to any significant disruption of the election.

What to watch out for politically:

- It was still unclear in 2023 whether this election would take place: postponing the election was seriously discussed in government circles due to the turmoil caused by the war. **However, the Prigozhin revolt prompted the Kremlin to want to hold the election on time at all costs in order to dispel the emerging doubts about domestic political stability.** The presidential administration under Anton Vaino and his domestic political appointee Sergei Kiriyenko have repeatedly indicated in the run-up to the election that they are primarily interested in a high voter turnout and not so much in Putin's final result. The mobilisation of state employees entitled to vote, which is visible in the election statistics, as well as the use of the easily manipulated electronic voting software, caused voter turnout to rise to a record level of 75%. **The real message of this vote is therefore that Russia is not just passively, but out of deep conviction, behind Vladimir Putin's course, including his war against Ukraine.**

- The manipulated Moscow election result should be seen above all against the backdrop of the **protest potential that has repeatedly come to light** recently.

The successful signature campaign by the otherwise insignificant anti-war candidate Nadezhdin and the large numbers of people lining up to mourn Navalny's grave are just as

much examples of this as the successful "*Midday against Putin*" protest campaign. **It is estimated that 10 to 15% of the population (15 to 20 million) can be counted as opponents of the war and the regime based on surveys and the corresponding use of exile media.** As the urban population in particular tends to be younger and more critical of Putin, these striking election results are intended to have an intimidating effect and even eliminate the previously tolerated visibility of dissent within the system.

- The idea behind the "**Lunch Hour against Putin**" campaign was invented by St Petersburg MP Maksim Resnik and supported by Navalny from prison. Yulia Navalnaya's adoption of the idea after her husband's death effectively ended the Russian opposition's sometimes paralysing strategic debate about the right way to handle the election (from boycotting the election to destroying ballot papers and voting for anyone not named Putin). **The campaign was a coordinated call to come to the polling stations on the third day of the elections - Sunday 17 March - at 12:00 noon on the dot in order to vote legally.** No laws would be broken, it would just be queues of citizens willing to vote and not a demonstration or rally. The idea has motivated many dissident Russians not to stay at home, but to actively and visibly show their opposition through this last remaining legal option.

- The campaign was **a success both in Germany and abroad**, with the queue in Berlin in particular becoming the main global centre of the "*Midday Hour*". People queued from the entrance to the Russian embassy in Unter den Linden, along Glinka and Behrentstraße, down Wilhelmstraße and into Voßstraße. More than 7 hours after the queue had formed, the embassy closed its doors to those still waiting to vote. The hours-long presence of Yulia Navalnaya, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the mother of imprisoned opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Mursa, famous artists such as rapper Lugalize and gallery owner Marat Gelman, as well as public intellectuals such as Ekaterina Shulman, turned the action **into the largest public quasi-rally of anti-war and anti-regime activists to date, with a worldwide media impact.**

- The action has shown **solidarity with dissident voters** in Russia and **consolidated and strengthened the Russian opposition following the death of Navalny.** Nevertheless, the **Russian government is asserting its interpretive monopoly over the large turnout.** The Russian Foreign Ministry is already citing the effects of the closure of the other four Russian consulates as the reason for the crowd, as well as the "phenomenal participation of patriotic citizens" in Berlin. **Two irrefutable narratives will now emerge to explain the crowds.**

- **This "election" seems to mark the beginning of a new chapter in Russia's political history.**

Putin appears liberated, publicly naming Navalny for the first time in his election victory press conference and considering the rallying of society behind him to be complete after two years of warfare. Unpopular measures, such as a large-scale tax reform to finance the war and a possible further partial mobilisation to send the frontline fighters home, are to be expected. However, the Kremlin continues to face an **economic policy trilemma**: it wants to (1) maintain the everyday normality of most citizens and consumers through currency and price interventions, (2) maintain macroeconomic stability and (3) fulfil the drastically increased security budget³. **There is room for manoeuvre for this balancing act in the short and**

¹ Multi-day elections were introduced as a pandemic control measure to reduce crowds and have now been maintained due to their usefulness - physical manipulation of ballot boxes at polling stations is much easier to accomplish in the nights between election days.

² He is now 71, in 2030 he would be 77, in 2036 83 years old.

³ 6-8% GDP depending on methodology

medium term, assuming stable oil prices and a sustained economy supported by military orders.

- **At the same time, the last two years show that all events of domestic political significance came as a surprise to both the public and the Kremlin** - the Prigozhin mutiny, the anti-Semitic protests in Dagestan, the current unrest in Bashkortostan, the protest dynamics surrounding Nadezhdin and Navalny, the food price crises for eggs and chicken meat, the threat of petrol prices rising due to Ukrainian refinery attacks and the diesel shortage in the 2023 harvest season. The Islamist attack on a concert hall in Moscow is just further evidence of the Russian leadership's lack of planning certainty.

- The Kremlin will continue to have to display a great deal of short-term and attention-intensive manoeuvring to manage such crises and is therefore not immediately on the threshold of a new strategic offensive against Ukraine or on any other "front". **It is to be expected that low-cost, asymmetric and destabilising instruments will remain the Russian means of choice, at least until the outcome of the American presidential election.**