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Ritual > election

Putin's only critical challenger is not allowed to run in the elections. Despite its power, the Kremlin is afraid of real alternatives

Presidential election campaigns in Russia are done differently. Practically all representatives of the political establishment are singing the praises of Vladimir Putin, backed by a media power loyal to the government. The ritual is coordinated by the powerful presidential administration, whose aim is to achieve a better outcome for Putin while also securing greater voter turnout than last time. All this is a well-oiled machine that has been in place for decades.

Apart from the toothless system parties in parliament, the Kremlin is effectively responsible for deciding whose name is on the ballot paper besides Putin — and has not authorised any such candidate via the pro-government election commission. Having said that, the possibility of voting clandestinely for other candidates than the long-term president is an important democratic relic in Russia, and so it is worth taking a look at who is eligible to stand for election at the presidential elections from 15 to 17 March.

Following the mainstream political line

The candidates of the three parliamentary factions outside Putin's party of power, United Russia, paint a sad picture here. The KPRF party, for example. During the last election in 2018, this party entered the electoral race with Pavel Grudinin, who came so close to Putin that he almost had to be considered a serious contender. The Kremlin media were forced to run a smear campaign against Grudinin during the election campaign to reduce his share of the vote. There is no danger of this in 2024 with candidate Nikolai Kharitonov. The aged State Duma deputy – who, at 75, is actually four years older than Putin – stood for election against the incumbent back in 2004 and, with just 13 per cent of the votes, achieved a meagre result for the then still vital KPRF. Otherwise, he is a rather lacklustre supporter of the war.

Since Kharitonov's first rival candidacy, the Communists, like most of their supporters, have aged by 20 years. Despite having once been considered an alternative to Putin's 'United Russia' by some dissatisfied people, they have adapted to the dominant mainstream in Russia since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, and those critical of the war have been removed from the party. They have thus retreated to their designated place as a niche home for Soviet nostalgics. Kharitonov, who also began his political career in the USSR, fits this role well. Nevertheless, many were surprised that the KPRF put forward such a weak candidate against Putin, who also scarcely motivated the election campaign.

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Better known representatives of the system opposition, however, feel no need to publicly display a programmed loser against Putin. This is also reflected by the behaviour of the chairman of the parliamentary party 'New People'. This party, as an economic-liberal Kremlin project, known as 'spoiler' in Russia, intends to poach middle-class voters away from the liberal opposition. Yet, the chairman, cosmetics entrepreneur Alexei Netschajew, is not running against Putin himself, but will send a rather unknown historian and sociologist, Vladislav Davankov, into the race. The 40-year-old has been a member of the State Duma since 2021, and even in the mayoral elections in Moscow, only received 5.3 per cent of votes. In the Duma, he deals with legislative initiatives, for example parking fees or electric scooters.

With Dawankov and Kharitonov, Putin's circle of certain contenders is so weak that the Kremlin environment worries that the upcoming election could too evidently turn out to be a farce. The powerful are receiving help here from the Duma party LDPR, which was founded by the late populist Vladimir Zhirinovsky. This party is dutifully presenting its party chairman Leonid Sluzki for election, an economics graduate and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Duma. That this is in the interests of the powerful is reflected by the KPRF's recent complaints in the Russian State Duma that Sluzki received far more airtime in the state media than Kharitonov.

No opposition is to be expected from Sluzki. Even at a time when the Communists had repeatedly revolted against the power environment in domestic politics, the LDPR was, despite its populism, characterised by

its unconditional support for all important Kremlin initiatives. It can be best described as a branch of the power apparatus aimed at picking up voters with a preference for tough and down-to-earth rhetoric. Leonid Sluzki is a worthy successor of his mentor, party founder Zhirinovsky. In February 2023, he shone with the statement that in times of war 'there is only one party – the party of the victory.' He was surrounded by scandal due to accusations of sexual harassment by Russian journalists and a luxurious lifestyle that was not declared for tax purposes, among other things. Yet, Sluzki is expected to achieve a good outcome among fans of tough rhetoric. With the support of the Kremlin media, many believe him capable of achieving second place behind Putin and thus ousting the weak Communists, who have traditionally held this position.

Some critics do exist

In addition to the Duma parties, other forces can nominate presidential candidates, too. This year, however, all of them failed at the entry hurdles to candidacy. Boris Nadezhdin is worth mentioning here. The 60-year-old was the only one of them to manage the first step towards a candidacy and to have been admitted to the petition, who was critical of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This admission – in contrast to other war critics – was due to the fact that Nadezhdin is more moderate. To date, he has been more or less successful in liberal parties of varying proximity to the Kremlin and levels criticism within an acceptable framework; rather than fundamentally criticising the system itself.

However, Nadezhdin often speaks openly about how Putin made a fatal mistake with the war. The physicist and mathematician thus became the great hope of those politically interested Russians who are against the invasion or are at least critical of it. Testimony to this were the long queues in front of the places where the necessary petition signatures for Nadezhdin were collected. He wants to achieve double the required amount of signatures, step two for the candidature, which is also likely to be realistic.

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The fact that he is now not allowed to stand for presidential elections is due to the amount of signatures criticised by the Russian electoral commission. This often leads to a non-admission prior to elections, and there are numerous indications that the signatures of candidates outside the Kremlin come under much closer scrutiny — if necessary, via graphologists employed by the commission. Despite the low chances of success, Nadezhdin

intends to challenge the decision before the court.

In the debate in German-speaking countries prior to his exit, Nadezhdin was accused of only being allowed to run because he was acting covertly for the Kremlin. It was said that an unsuccessful, genuine opponent of the war could well have been in the Kremlin's interests. Voter turnout would increase, especially since the authorities have a tried and tested reservoir of opportunities to influence results.

The election also fails to fulfil the function of a real selection, since Putin is set to win. Instead, it is a referendum on Putin's fundamental line, especially in view of the war being waged. The Kremlin is aware that the significance of this is now limited in an election between candidates who mostly follow this line. The fact that Nadezhdin was still stopped after having secured support from an astonishingly large number of Russians is a sign of weakness and nervousness. Despite having superior power, there is a deep-seated fear of losing control of the electoral process owing to a genuine alternative to their own agenda. So the ritual is preferred in this case.



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