

# [***The drama in Russia's election is all about what Putin will do with another 6 years in power***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJC-6VY1-DYMD-62Y9-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

TALLINN, Estonia — As Vladimir Putin heads for [*another six-year term*](https://apnews.com/hub/russia-election) as Russia's president, there's little electoral drama in the race. What he does after he crosses the finish line is what's drawing attention and, for many observers, provoking anxiety.

The voting that concludes on Sunday is all but certain to allow Putin to remain in office until 2030, giving him a full three decades of leading Russia as either president or prime minister.

The heft of that long tenure and the thorough [*suppression of effective domestic opposition voices*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-crackdown-opposition-dissent-prison-532705369591610a94e9e86340233380) gives Putin a very strong — and perhaps unrestrained — hand.

That position is bolstered by the [*Russian economy's surprising resilience*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-economy-putin-election-ukraine-97a5f92113e54cd9af0aa31778069a3e) despite wide-ranging Western sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine.

It's also strengthened by Moscow's incremental but consistent battlefield advances in recent months, flagging support for military aid to Kyiv from the United States and other quarters, and growing skepticism in some Western countries over more progressive social attitudes that echoes Putin's push for “traditional values.”

Putin, in short, would head into a new term with few obvious restraints, and that could manifest itself quickly in major new actions.

“Russia’s presidential election is not so important as what will come after. Putin has often postponed unpopular moves until after elections," Bryn Rosenfeld, a Cornell University professor who studies post-Communist ***politics***, said in a commentary.

Probably the most unpopular move he could make at home would be to order a second military mobilization to fight in Ukraine; the first, in September 2022, sparked protests, and a wave of Russians fled the country to avoid being called up. However unpopular a second mobilization might be, it could also mollify relatives of the soldiers who were drafted 18 months ago.

Some in Russia believe it could happen.

“Russian leaders are now talking of ‘consolidating the whole of Russian society around its defense needs,’" Brian Michael Jenkins, a senior adviser at the RAND Corporation think tank told The Associated Press.

“The precise meaning of this phrase is not entirely clear, but it suggests that Russia’s leadership understands that the war Putin describes will go on for a long time, and therefore resources must be mobilized,” he added. “In other words, Russian society must be organized for perpetual warfare.”

But Tatiana Stanovaya, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, says Putin doesn’t need a mobilization partly because many Russians from poorer regions have signed up to fight in order to get higher pay than what they can earn in their limited opportunities at home.

In addition, Putin’s apparent confidence that the war is turning in Russia’s favor is likely to make him continue to insist that the only way to end the conflict is for Ukraine to sit down at the negotiating table, she said. “Which, in fact, means capitulation.”

While support for Ukraine lags in Washington, both French President Emmanuel Macron and Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski have said recently that sending troops to back Kyiv is at least a hypothetical possibility.

With those statements in mind, Putin may be motivated to test the resolve of NATO.

Alexandra Vacroux, executive director of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, posits that Russia within several years will make an attempt to assess NATO's commitment to [*Article 5*](https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-nato-article-5-88883436438dae49ba9cacb6d4cfad0a), the alliance’s common defense guarantee under which an attack on one member is considered an attack on all.

“I don’t think that Putin thinks that he needs to be physically, militarily stronger than all of the other countries. He just needs them to be weaker and more fractured. And so the question for him is like ... instead of worrying so much about making myself stronger, how can I make everyone else weaker?” she said.

“So in order to do that, it’s like you have to find a situation where you could test Article 5,” and if the response is mild or uncertain “then you’ve shown that, like NATO is just a paper tiger,” Vacroux said.

Russia could run such a test without overt military action, she said, adding, “You could imagine, like, one of the big questions is what kind of cyberattack constitutes a threat to attack?”

Although it is not a NATO member, [*the country of Moldova*](https://apnews.com/article/moldova-russia-war-ukraine-transnistria-eu-6c14d96e8cdc0bc699f0315eecaab4f6) is increasingly worried about becoming a Russian target. Since the invasion of Ukraine, neighboring Moldova has faced crises that have raised fears in its capital of Chisinau that the country is also in the Kremlin’s crosshairs.

The congress in Moldova's separatist Transnistria region, where Russia bases about 1,500 soldiers as nominal peacekeepers, have appealed to Moscow for diplomatic “protection” because of alleged increasing pressure from Moldova.

That appeal potentially leaves “a lot of room for escalation,” said Cristain Cantir, a Moldovan international relations professor at Oakland University. “I think it’s useful to see the congress and the resolution as a warning to Moldova that Russia may get more involved in Transnistria if Chisinau does not make concessions.”

On the Russian home front, more repressive measures could come in a new Putin term, even though opposition supporters and independent media already are cowed or silenced.

Stanovaya suggested that Putin himself does not drive repressive measures but that he approves such actions that are devised by others in the expectation that these are what the Kremlin leader wants.

“Many players are trying to survive and to adapt, and they compete against each other and often they have contradictory interests," she said. “And they are trying all together in parallel to secure their own priorities and the stability of the regime.”

Russia last year [*banned the notional LGBTQ+*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-lgbtq-crackdown-extremist-supreme-court-1b8f4cd8708d1c6cf3486c5f27fd7354) “movement” by declaring it to be extremist in what officials said was a fight for traditional values like those espoused by the Russian Orthodox Church in the face of Western influence. Courts also banned gender transitioning.

Ben Noble, an associate professor of Russian ***politics*** at University College London, said he believes the LGBTQ+ community could face further repression in a new Putin term.

In the Kremlin's eye, they “can be held up as an import from the decadent West,” he said.

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Stephen McGrath in Sighisoara, Romania, contributed to this report.

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This story corrects Noble's title to associate professor.

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