

# [***Putin set to sweep to fifth term as Russians head to polls***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJD-9G01-DY7V-G01N-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

March 14, 2024 Thursday 11:56 AM GMT

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**Length:** 1103 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Russians are heading to the polls for a [*presidential election*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/25/europe/russia-presidential-election-explainer-putin-intl/index.html) that is set to hand Vladimir Putin a fifth term in power as he faces opponents carefully curated by the Kremlin and who pose no real threat to his legitimacy.

Voting started on Friday and will continue until Sunday across the country's 11 time zones - from the far eastern regions near Alaska to the western exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Coast - and its 88 federal subjects, including [*parts of occupied Ukraine illegally annexed by Russia*](https://cnn.com/2022/09/30/europe/putin-russia-ukraine-annexation-intl/index.html#:~:text=Under%20the%20annexation%20process%2C%20which,two%20areas%20in%20southern%20Ukraine) after it launched its full-scale invasion more than two years ago.

With most opposition candidates either [*dead*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/16/europe/alexey-navalny-dead-russia-prison-intl/index.html), [*jailed*](https://cnn.com/2023/04/17/europe/vladimir-kara-murza-sentencing-russia-intl/index.html), [*exiled*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/20/europe/yulia-navalnaya-russian-opposition-challenges-intl/index.html), [*barred from running*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/08/europe/russia-nadezhdin-election-candidate-disqualified-intl/index.html) or simply token figures, a victory for Putin, who has in effect been Russia's head of state since before the turn of the century, is all but guaranteed.

Putin's reelection would extend his rule until at least 2030. Following [*constitutional changes*](https://cnn.com/2020/07/01/europe/russia-referendum-putin-power-2036-intl/index.html) in 2020, he would then be able to run again and potentially stay in power until 2036, which would see him secure his place as [*Russia's*](https://www.cnn.com/world/europe/russia) longest-serving ruler since Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) approved only three candidates to oppose Putin: Leonid Slutsky of the Liberal Democratic Party, Vladislav Davankov of the New People Party and Nikolay Kharitonov of the Communist Party. All three men are thought to be satisfactorily pro-Kremlin and none oppose the invasion of Ukraine.

The opposition candidates are, by their own admission, unlikely to take many votes away from the president. Slutsky, the candidate for the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and whose lavish spending was once exposed in one of Navalny's [*investigations*](https://navalny.com/p/5798/), said he would [*not call on Russians to vote against Putin*](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/12/19/russias-far-right-ldpr-nominates-leader-for-2024-presidential-race-a83480).

"A vote for Slutsky and LDPR is absolutely not a vote against Putin," he said.

Although the ruling United Russia party has declared its "full support" for the president, Putin is running as an independent candidate, placing himself above party ***politics***.

Two prominent anti-war candidates were barred from running. Yekaterina Duntsova was rejected by the CEC for alleged errors in her registration documents. [*Boris Nadezhdin*](https://cnn.com/videos/world/2024/02/08/exp-russia-election-nadezhdin-putin-pleitgen-live-020808aseg1-cnni-world.cnn) later submitted the 100,000 signatures required to oppose Putin, before the CEC in February deemed only 95,587 of these to be legitimate.

The election also comes shortly after the death of Alexey Navalny, Putin's most formidable opponent, in an Arctic penal colony on February 16. Russia's prison service said Navalny "felt unwell after a walk" and lost consciousness, later attributing his death to natural causes. The Kremlin denied any involvement in his death.

Navalny had previously been poisoned with the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok, which a [*CNN-Bellingcat investigation*](https://cnn.com/2020/12/14/europe/russia-navalny-agents-bellingcat-ward/index.html) found he had been tailed by a unit of the Russian Security Service (FSB) that specialized in toxins and nerve agents.

Despite heavy police presence and the [*threat of arrest*](https://cnn.com/videos/world/2024/03/01/mourners-speak-navalny-funeral-russia-lon-orig-is.cnn), thousands of mourners gathered in Moscow for [*Navalny's funeral*](https://cnn.com/2024/03/01/europe/navalny-funeral-moscow-intl/index.html), where crowds were heard chanting his name and shouting "Putin is a killer" and "No to war." Days after the funeral, Russians continued to [*shower his grave with flowers*](https://cnn.com/videos/world/2024/03/04/exp-navalny-mourners-sebastian-shukla-live-030403aseg1-cnni-world.cnn).

While Navalny, who had been sentenced to more than 30 years in prison, would not have been able to challenge Putin, his death cast a shadow over the elections and rid Russia of its most prominent opposition figure.

Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya, has urged Russians to turn out collectively on the final day of the elections on Sunday at noon as a show of opposition.

"Putin killed my husband exactly a month before the so-called elections. These elections are fake, but Putin still needs them. For propaganda. He wants the whole world to believe that everyone in Russia supports and admires him. Don't believe this propaganda," she said.

While the results of the elections are a foregone conclusion, they remain an essential tool in demonstrating Putin's legitimacy among the Russian population.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted last August in [*The New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/06/world/europe/putins-forever-war.html) as saying: "Our presidential election is not really democracy, it is costly bureaucracy." He said Putin would be reelected with more than 90% of the vote.

Peskov later sought to clarify his comments, telling Russian state media TASS that he meant "the level of consolidation around the president is absolutely unprecedented" and that, if Putin ran again, "he will be reelected by an overwhelming majority."

The dismantling of Russia's opposition has fed public [*apathy*](https://cnn.com/2023/02/27/europe/russia-propaganda-information-ukraine-anniversary-cmd-intl/index.html). Most Russians have never witnessed a democratic transfer of power between rival political parties in a traditional presidential election, and the crackdown on dissent has worked to keep much of the population disengaged from ***politics***.

The war in Ukraine has, however, threatened to pierce some of that apathy. From [*cross-border drone strikes*](https://cnn.com/2024/01/08/europe/russia-ukraine-belgorod-evacuations-strikes-intl/index.html) to the former Wagner chief [*Yevgeny Prigozhin's march on Moscow*](https://cnn.com/2023/06/26/europe/prigozhin-speaks-moscow-march-intl/index.html) and the [*sheer human cost*](https://cnn.com/2023/12/12/politics/russia-troop-losses-us-intelligence-assessment/index.html) of [*sustaining its military*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/14/europe/russia-sustain-war-effort-ukraine-analysis-intl/index.html), the Kremlin has not been able to isolate its population from the effects of the conflict.

But in his annual [*state of the nation address*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/29/europe/putin-nuclear-war-state-of-nation-russia-ukraine-intl/index.html) last month, Putin lauded the progress of Russia's military, which he said "firmly holds the initiative in Ukraine" after Kyiv's recent retreat from the eastern town of [*Avdiivka*](https://cnn.com/2024/02/19/europe/ukrainian-avdiivka-soldiers-messages-intl/index.html).

Despite its costs and the fact that the war, intended to last a few weeks, has entered its third year, the invasion of Ukraine has provided Putin a nationalist message around which to rally Russians.

Gauging popular opinion is difficult in authoritarian countries like Russia, where many are fearful of criticizing the Kremlin and the few independent polling organizations and think tanks operate under strict surveillance.

But the Levada Center, a non-governmental polling organization, consistently reports Putin's approval rating at over 80% - a staggering figure virtually unknown among Western politicians, and a substantial increase compared to the three years before the full-scale invasion of Ukrainian.

The war has also garnered widespread support, according to Levada, although its latest surveys show the majority of Russians support peace talks.

Polls opened in Russia's far eastern Kamchatka at 8 a.m. local time on Friday (4 p.m. ET on Thursday) and will close more than 7,000 kilometers (4,300 miles) away in Kaliningrad at 8 p.m. on Sunday (2 p.m. ET). Early voting in remote, hard-to reach areas began in late February, as well as in parts of occupied Ukraine.

This story has been updated.

By Christian Edwards, CNN

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**Load-Date:** March 15, 2024

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