



Theirs to Lose: Rival Russian Presidential Candidates Aim Low

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Russia is preparing for its first presidential election since the invasion of Ukraine, to be held on 15-17 March. Russians have limited choices besides Vladimir Putin, with only representatives of the “systemic opposition”—controlled by the regime—allowed to run as candidates for the office of the head of state. Blocking the officially anti-war Boris Nadezhdin from taking part in the so-called election is indicative of the Russian authorities’ fear of disruption of the process and the warlike course of Russian politics.

On 8 February this year, the Central Election Commission (CEC) of the Russian Federation released the final list of candidates for the presidential election. The ballot will include the incumbent president, Vladimir Putin, Nikolai Kharitonov (Communist Party), Leonid Slutsky (Social Democrat), and Duma deputy chair Vladislav Davankov. The last time so few candidates took part in a presidential selection was in 2008 when Dmitry Medvedev won. Like then, the regime’s aim this time is to manually control the electoral process to limit as much as possible the voters’ freedom of choice of president.

Putin’s Systemic “Rivals”. According to 2020 amendments to Russia’s constitution, Putin (aged 72) is entitled to run for president for a fifth time. The Russian authorities have carefully selected his counter-candidates, who will create a semblance of rivalry but which have no chance of victory. The criteria for picking Putin’s electoral opponents included their degree of political recognition, gender, age, and stance on Russia’s war against Ukraine. All candidates are on Western sanctions lists due to their involvement in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Putin, official an independent candidate, had to collect at least 300,000 signatures to be on the ballot, while the candidates designated by the parties represented in parliament did not have to collect any.

Slutsky (aged 59) represents the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). He is pro-war and took part on the Russian

side in the negotiations with the Ukrainian delegation at the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) proposed Kharitonov (aged 75), who participated in the 2004 presidential campaign and received 13.7% of the vote then. The CPRF decided to nominate Kharitonov so he would draw away fewer votes from Putin than party leader Gennady Zyuganov, a regular participant in the presidential elections (1996, 2000, 2008 and 2012). Kharitonov has declared that he does not intend to criticise Putin in the campaign.

The youngest of the candidates, and also the least known among them, is Davankov (aged 39), who is running on behalf of the New People party, which the ruling United Russia party uses to criticise the liberal-market agenda for Russia. He was a businessman and has been a deputy chair in the Russian parliament since 2021. Although he does not openly speak against the war in Ukraine, he proposed in the Duma that criminal sanctions should not be introduced for anti-war posts on social media.

Anti-War Candidates Rejected by the CEC. [Fearing a repeat of the Belarusian scenario in Russia \(mass demonstrations in support of the opposition candidate, Svetlana Tikhonouskaya\)](#), the Russian authorities did not permit any candidate from outside the Russian parliament to enter the race. Citing procedural reasons, the CEC refused to allow journalist and former MP Yelizaveta Duntsova (aged 41) to

collect signatures. Then, the CEC questioned the credibility of the signatures collected by Nadezhdin (aged 61), primarily because some Russians were rallying around these two individuals, who had expressed anti-war stance, among other statements the Kremlin did not approve of. Nadezhdin, who was nominated by the extra-parliamentary party Civic Initiative, argued that he had managed to collect 211,000 signatures in Russia alone (without Russians abroad), of which he selected the required 105,000 for the CEC.

Allowing Nadezhdin to collect signatures at all was the Russian authorities' attempt to discredit his anti-war views and test the potential for mobilising anti-regime citizens. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the politician had been a frequent guest on Russian propaganda programmes. As a critic of the war, he was vilified and ridiculed during these appearances. The authorities assumed that Russian citizens would not support him, however, in mid-January this year, Russians began queuing *en masse* to give their signatures to his candidacy and contributed money to his campaign.

Nadezhdin's quick rise in popularity was heavily influenced by the attitude of the Russian opposition in exile. On social media and YouTube, opposition-minded Russians began to argue that a vote for an anti-war candidate would be a vote against Putin in the first place. The politician's interviews with opinionated opposition figure Maksim Katz and political scientist Ekaterina Shulman had the biggest impact. The agitation in favour of Nadezhdin helped to break down the internal disputes of the Russian opposition in exile, despite the fact that its representatives had many doubts about Nadezhdin's views on other topics. The politician, despite his anti-war stance, avoids a clear-cut answer on the future of Crimea (he declared his desire for a repeat referendum) and presents himself as a "Russian patriot".

The Dilemma of Anti-War-Minded Russians. The authorities' refusal to allow Nadezhdin on the ballot confronts anti-regime and [anti-war Russians with difficult decisions](#). They fear that the signatures of support for him will be used by those in power to repress activists opposed to the war. Particularly after the [death on 16 February of Alexei Navalny](#), the security services began to detain residents of Russian cities who, for example, tried to lay flowers at symbolic sites. Preventive arrests of active Russians are intended to help channel widespread citizen support for Putin. Election rigging will be facilitated by the possibility of digital voting, which this time will cover the whole of Russia and not just major cities. Voting is to take place in Ukrainian occupied territories and outside Russia.

According to data as of 1 January 2024, there are 1,890,863 Russians with active voting rights abroad.

[The opposition in exile has several proposals for the voting period](#). It calls on Russians to actively participate in the elections and vote intelligently (in line with Navalny's earlier proposals for strategic voting), so against Putin, or for any other candidate. In addition to this, the opposition calls on Russians to go to vote in person, and preferably to line up at polling stations at 12:00 on the last day of voting (Sunday). By doing this, it is hoped most Russians will see how many citizens there are who disagree with Putin. Opposition figure Maksim Katz further suggests that they should dress in white and blue colours, referring to the [white and blue and white flag used in anti-war demonstrations](#) in the West.

Conclusions. The conduct of the presidential elections in Russia is intended to confirm the persistence of the [Putin system and demonstrate to the elite that the Russian authorities completely control the process](#). The outcome is a foregone conclusion and the vote will not be democratic, fair, or transparent. The fact that the vote will take place in the occupied territories of Ukraine also undermines their legitimacy. The rejection of the nominally anti-war candidates Duntsova and Nadezhdin reduces the chances of mobilising Russians at home against Putin. At the same time, the Russian opposition will encourage acts of public defiance, especially in the context of Navalny's death. The representative of the New People Party, Davankov, wants to win the votes of disaffected Russians, as he argues that he identifies with some of Nadezhdin's demands.

At the same time, the non-admission of Nadezhdin and Duntsova to the elections shows uncertainty among the Russian power elite, led by Putin. The authorities may have allowed Nadezhdin to run in order to discredit his anti-war views, but in the end they considered it too risky for the Putin system, which is based on the loyalty of the elite to the leader and the passivity of the Russian public. With voices emerging among Russians about the rising costs of waging war in Ukraine, Putin fears demonstrations and protests.

Western countries may support representatives of the Russian opposition in exile who promote politicians with anti-war demands. Duntsova has announced that she will form her own political party and join forces with Nadezhdin, as she looks to capitalise on her popularity in the upcoming elections to the Moscow Duma (probably in September 2024) or the Federal Duma (2026). EU countries should prepare to receive Russians who gave their signature in support of Nadezhdin's candidacy, as well as others who may protest during the elections and will be repressed, if they try to apply for humanitarian visas in the West.