

Russia's 2018 Presidential Election

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Russia's next presidential election is scheduled for March 18, 2018, the fourth anniversary of Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has served as president or prime minister of Russia for over 18 years, is widely expected to secure reelection easily against seven other candidates, especially given the government's tight control over the country's political process. With presidential terms in Russia lasting six years, victory could keep Putin in office until at least 2024.

Promoting Putin

Russia's presidential election is only minimally competitive. Putin is running as an independent candidate rather than as the candidate of the ruling United Russia party, which is relatively less popular than the president. Putin declared his candidacy in December 2017 and has conducted what observers [consider](#) a perfunctory national campaign, with state-controlled media around the country [pushing](#) favorable election coverage. In a March 2018 state of the nation speech that observers considered a campaign speech, Putin [promoted](#) an agenda of domestic reform, economic prosperity, and nuclear invincibility. Presidential spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has [said](#) he does not think anyone doubts that Putin "is the absolute leader of political Olympus ... with whom hardly anyone can seriously compete." The comment [prompted](#) Russia's Central Election Commission chairwoman to issue a rare reprimand.

Many observers [argue](#) that the Russian government's main objective for the election is to ensure a relatively high voter turnout to bolster perceptions of legitimacy and popular enthusiasm for Putin. Media reports have [indicated](#) that the administration's goal is 70%

victory and 70% turnout (in 2012, Putin received 64% of the vote with 65% turnout). Some [believe](#) that other candidates were approved—and possibly even handpicked by the government—in the hopes that they could boost turnout and provide a veneer of democratic legitimacy without being disruptive forces at the ballot box or in protests.

The government would like to avoid the spectacle of 2011-2012, when Putin's announced return to the presidency (after a stint as prime minister) and fraud-tainted parliamentary elections led to Russia's largest protest movement in years. Putin has [accused](#) the United States of supporting those protests. Despite evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, senior U.S. officials have [suggested](#) the United States does not seek to retaliate in kind.

Limiting an Election Challenge?

Notably, the government did not permit prominent anticorruption activist and former Moscow mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny to run. Officially, Navalny is barred due to a 2013 financial crimes conviction that his supporters and most outside observers deem politically motivated. Authorities also have denied registration to Navalny's Progress Party.

In March and June 2017, nationwide protests that Navalny spearheaded reportedly [attracted](#) thousands of people, many university-aged or younger, to demonstrate against corruption. Hundreds of protestors were temporarily detained, and Navalny [served](#) a total of 40 days in prison.

After being barred from the election, Navalny called for an election boycott and protests. He also released a video [purporting](#) to reveal an example of corrupt linkages between Russia's politicians and wealthy businessmen (often referred to as *oligarchs*). Navalny is [known](#) for producing engaging popular videos that document alleged corruption among high-level officials.

In addition to barring Navalny from the election, the government cracked down on his campaign infrastructure and nongovernmental organization, the Foundation for the Fight Against Corruption, ostensibly for various infractions related to fundraising, protests, and the corruption video. After a January 2018 protest, Navalny and a few hundred supporters again were briefly [detained](#), and some members of Navalny's team were given short prison sentences.

Alternative Candidates

Besides Navalny, another opposition figure who has attracted attention is Civil Initiative candidate Ksenia Sobchak, a television talk-show host and celebrity whose late father, former St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak, was once Putin's boss in the city government. Since the 2011-2012 opposition protests, Sobchak has been an advocate of liberal democratic change in Russia. By her own [account](#), Sobchak is not running to win but to provide voters, especially youth, the opportunity to cast a protest vote and to build momentum for the development of a new political movement. Some [suggest](#) that her past reputation as a wealthy socialite and reality TV star, as well as her outspoken views in support of LGBT rights and against Russia's war in Ukraine, limit her appeal among Russian voters.

Within Russia, another candidate, Communist Party nominee Pavel Grudinin, has generated interest. Grudinin was a surprise pick to replace the Communists' perennial candidate, party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov, presumably in an effort to broaden the party's appeal. More a [promoter](#) of business-friendly socialism than orthodox communism, Grudinin is the wealthy director of the (private) Lenin State Farm outside Moscow. Grudinin is not a Communist Party member and was once a member of the United Russia party and a local politician. His

lively [criticism](#) of the government has circulated online and garnered him a broad audience, though he is expected to secure only 10%-15% of the vote.

Among the remaining five contenders are two long-standing fixtures of Russian politics: nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and liberal Grigory Yavlinsky. Zhirinovskiy has competed in all but one Russian presidential election since 1991. Yavlinsky ran in 1996 and 2000; his candidacy was disqualified in his third attempt to run in 2012.

After the Election

Although most observers do not expect to be surprised by the outcome of Russia's presidential election, uncertainty persists about what might come after and Putin's longer-term intentions, including

- Will Putin, aged 65, seek to stay in power for a full six-year term (and possibly extend his rule by other means), or will he seek to hand off power to a successor earlier?
- Will Putin maintain strong centralized control over the state apparatus, or will different factions become increasingly independent of the president as they begin jockeying for power?
- Will the Russian government appease the Russian population through new economic growth and/or military adventures, or will there be a rise of popular dissatisfaction and dissent?
- Will Putin maintain a hard-line stance on Ukraine, Syria, cyberwarfare, and other foreign policies, or seek to negotiate some kind of rapprochement with the West?

For more on Russia, see CRS Report R44775, [Russia: Background and U.S. Policy](#).