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Supporters Praise Kremlin Bid by Former Separatist Commander Girkin

By AFP

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A supporter stands in front of Igor Girkin's 2024 campaign poster. **t.me/sotavisionmedia**

Hundreds of supporters of Igor Girkin, a jailed former commander of Russian-backed fighters in Ukraine, rallied in Moscow Sunday to back his bid to stand for president.

Better known by his alias Igor Strelkov, Girkin was a key leader of separatist fighters in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The nationalist has strongly criticized Russia's military strategy in Ukraine for being "too kind."

He was detained in July on an extremism charge following a series of posts critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is expected to easily win re-election.

In August, despite still being in prison, Girkin announced on social media that he wanted to run for president in the March elections.

More than 300 supporters gathered in a Moscow hotel where giant screens showed a picture

of Girkin.

Among those present was Mikhail Filippov, a 44-year-old long-bearded electrician, who had traveled from his home in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

He praised Girkin, saying he would "fully take on the function of supreme commander [of Russia] and would not let himself be hoodwinked."

Those gathered included many women, older people and military veterans. Girkin's supporters wore T-shirts and badges bearing his face and the slogan "Freedom for Strelkov!"

"There are currently many supporters of Strelkov on the front" in Ukraine, said Yevgeny Skripnik, a soldier who fought alongside Girkin in the Donbas in 2014 against the Ukrainian army.

Supporters acknowledged Girkin had no chance of having his candidacy approved.

"The aim [of the campaign] is completely different," said Mikhail Polynkov who is one of the group's organizers. "On the eve of turmoil, comrades-in-arms need to unite."

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