

Exit Polls Show Putin to Cement Hardline Rule After Setpiece Vote

By [AFP](#)

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The aftermath of fresh aerial attacks on Belgorod on March 17. [vvgladkov / Telegram](#)

Vladimir Putin was headed for another six-year term as Russian president Sunday, exit polls showed, paving the way for the hardline former spy to become the longest-serving Russian leader in more than 200 years.

Victory for the 71-year-old in the three-day vote was never in doubt, with all his major opponents dead, in prison or exiled, and authorities waging an unrelenting crackdown on those who publicly oppose the Kremlin or its military offensive on Ukraine.

The government-run VTsIOM pollster projected Putin had won the election with 87% of the vote after polls closed in Russia's westernmost region of Kaliningrad at 17:00 GMT.

The highly touted election was marked by a surge in deadly Ukrainian bombardments, incursions into Russian territory by pro-Kyiv sabotage groups and vandalism at polling

stations.

The Kremlin cast the election as an opportunity for Russians to throw their weight behind the full-scale military operation in Ukraine, where voting is also being staged in Russian-controlled territories.

Kyiv slammed the vote as a sham and President Volodymyr Zelensky denounced Putin as a "dictator" who was "drunk from power."

"There is no evil he will not commit to prolong his personal power," Zelensky said in a message on social media.

Opposition dismisses vote

Allies of the late Alexei Navalny — Putin's most prominent rival, who died in an Arctic prison last month — has urged voters to flood polling stations at noon and spoil their ballots for a "Noon Against Putin" protest.

His wife, Yulia Navalnaya, was greeted by supporters with flowers and applause in Berlin. She said she had written her late husband's name on her ballot after voting at the Russian embassy.

Some voters in Moscow appeared to heed Navalny's call, telling AFP they had come to honor his memory and show their opposition in the only legal way possible.

"I came to show that there are many of us, that we exist, that we are not some insignificant minority," said 19-year-old student Artem Minasyan at a polling station in central Moscow.

Leonid Volkov, a senior aide to the late opposition leader who was recently attacked in Lithuania where he fled political persecution in Russia, dismissed the results published by Moscow.

"The percentages drawn for Putin have, of course, not the slightest relation to reality," Volkov, Navalny's former chief of staff, wrote on social media.

Russia's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, argued the long lines outside embassies abroad were evidence of support for the Kremlin.

"If the people queueing abroad to vote in the Russian presidential election had taken part in the 'noon' action, they would have all dispersed after noon. But no," she wrote on social media.

Tributes to Navalny

At Navalny's grave in a Moscow cemetery, AFP reporters saw spoiled ballot papers with his name scrawled across them on a pile of flowers.

Navalny, who galvanized mass protests, tried to run against Putin in the 2018 presidential election and toured Russia to drum up support, but his candidacy was rejected.

"We live in a country where we will go to jail if we speak our mind. So when I come to moments like this and see a lot of people, I realize that we are not alone," said 33-year-old Regina.

There were repeated acts of protest in the first days of polling, with a spate of arrests of Russians accused of pouring dye into ballot boxes or arson attacks.

Any public dissent in Russia has been harshly punished since the start of Moscow's offensive in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, and there were repeated warnings from the authorities against election protests.

The OVD-Info police monitoring group announced that at least 80 people had been detained across nearly 20 cities in Russia for protest actions linked to the elections.

The surge in Ukrainian strikes on Russia continued unabated with the Russian Defense Ministry reporting at least eight regions attacked overnight and on Sunday morning.

Fatal border attacks

Three airports serving the capital briefly suspended operations following the barrage, while a drone attack in the south sparked a fire at an oil refinery.

In Russia's border city of Belgorod, multiple rounds of shelling killed two — a man and a 16-year-old girl — and wounded 12 more, the region's governor said Sunday.

The governor has ordered the closure of shopping centers and schools in Belgorod and the surrounding area for two days because of the strikes.

In the Russian-controlled territory of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, where voting is also taking place, "kamikaze drones" set a polling station ablaze, according to the Moscow-installed authorities.

'Difficult period'

Putin, a former KGB agent, has been in power since the last day of 1999 and is set to extend his grip over the country until at least 2030.

If he completes another Kremlin term, he will have stayed in power longer than any Russian leader since Catherine the Great in the 18th century.

In a pre-election address, Putin said Russia was going through a "difficult period" and called on the country to be "united and self-confident."

A concert on Red Square is being staged on Monday to mark 10 years since Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula — an event that is also expected to serve as a victory celebration for Putin.

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