

## **Why Wait? Takeaways (Already) From This Weekend's Russian Election Opinion**

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**Most Russians believe their elections are unfair, but they don't care. Very few Russians believe elections are a realistic means of changing anything. Polls show that Russians generally favor "reform" but only when the concept is expressed vaguely.**

**Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin watches honor guards pass as he attends a wreath-laying ceremony to mark the Defender of the Fatherland Day at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the Kremlin wall in central Moscow in February 2016.**

By [Robert Coalson](#) for RFE/RL, March 16, 2018 16:52 GMT As Russians prepare to go to the polls in the March 18 presidential election, the usual questions don't apply. No one needs to ask which candidate ran the most effective campaign, which one put forward the most compelling platform, who will make it to the second round. And no one needs to ask who will win. Incumbent President Vladimir Putin will secure a fourth term as president, but that doesn't mean the events currently going on in Russia aren't instructive. Below are a few things that this process has brought to the fore.

**Putin Is Above Politics** Technically, there are eight candidates participating in the presidential election -- seven challengers and incumbent President Putin. In reality, however, Putin has given the entire campaign a pass. He didn't align himself with any party. He didn't seek funding, but instead -- officially, at least -- financed his campaign from various quasi-state funds and from the United Russia party. He didn't participate in televised campaign debates (in fact, he never has in any of his "campaigns"). He didn't produce a campaign platform. He didn't press the flesh or kiss babies or answer unscripted questions from journalists or voters. Instead, his entire campaign has consisted of a few *deus ex machina*-type, larger-than-life appearances such as his conveniently rescheduled state-of-the-nation address on March 1 and a brief appearance before a stadium full of supporters on March 3, during which he made vague promises such as, "we will do everything we can for [our children and grandchildren] to be happy. Even more importantly, though, is that the Kremlin has placed Putin entirely above and outside of politics. The 65-year-old incumbent who has ruled the country for more than 17 years has become as much a symbol of Russia as the matryoshka or the double-headed eagle. Putin's supporters may complain about various policies or problems in their lives, but they don't connect those problems with Putin. The Kremlin's decades of ironclad control over state media and over all the country's political processes have produced a situation where it is possible to grumble about low pensions or corruption, but where criticizing Putin personally is widely seen as bordering on treason. Occasionally one even hears comments to the effect that even holding elections at all is insulting to Putin's status. [⋮] <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-election-putin-2018/29104518.html>