Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 9.02.2024 www.osw.waw.pl

Russia: the anti-war candidate is removed from the presidential race

Maria Domańska

On 8 February, the Russian Central Electoral Commission refused to register Boris Nadezhdin as a candidate in the presidential election to be held on 15–17 March. The official reason behind this decision is that the validity of 15% of signatures in support of his candidacy which he had submitted had been called into question (he collected twice the required 100,000 signatures; 105,000 were submitted to the CEC). Nadezhdin was put forward by the liberal extra-parliamentary Civic Initiative party, and was the only contender to have criticised the invasion of Ukraine and Vladimir Putin himself. His candidacy was enthusiastically welcomed by a portion of the anti-war electorate and had also been backed by numerous opposition leaders. Putin's three rivals whose candidacies have been registered are barely known to the Russian public: Leonid Slutsky, Nikolai Kharitonov and Vladislav Davankov represent parliamentary parties which are loyal to the Kremlin and support the war.

Commentary

- As a politician, Nadezhdin is a well-known figure in groups linked with democratic opposition and civil society, although since 2003 he has not managed to win in any election held at a level higher than the local level (since 2019 he has been a councillor in the town of Dolgoprudny in Moscow oblast). In the past he cooperated with many different political parties, both independents and those linked with the Kremlin. In 2020, he called on the Russian public to vote against the constitutional reform which enabled Putin to effectively remain Russia's president for life. Nadezhdin's critics have accused him of attempting to flirt \ with the Kremlin. They point to his regular appearances on propaganda TV shows as a representative of the liberal-democratic groups (TV hosts invite such individuals to their shows for the sole purpose of enabling other participants to discredit their views).
- The Kremlin could have blocked Nadezhdin's participation in the election back when he first submitted his candidacy. The decision to allow him to collect signatures can be interpreted as an attempt to publicly challenge his views by presenting them as marginal. However, the public's relatively positive response to him (by Russian standards) has revealed the flaws in this calculation. An independent Russian Field poll commissioned by the candidate's campaign team showed that over 10% of the voters who had already decided were willing to vote for Nadezhdin.

- Although Putin's regime seems stable, the Kremlin is making every effort to eliminate any potential risk as soon as it arises. Therefore, the refusal to register Nadezhdin's candidacy is a manifestation of its fear of losing control over public sentiment should fatigue with the cost of the war grow further. Despite mounting repression, the government has been unable to suppress the hot spots of protest emerging in different locations. Although weak and isolated, their activity could intensify if the Kremlin tolerates any anti-war discourse in the electoral campaign.
- The refusal to register Nadezhdin's candidacy is thus convergent with the Kremlin's strategy. In the campaign the government intends to demonstrate the public's mobilisation around Putin as the only defender of Russian statehood and identity. The public debate leaves no room for any other narrative than the official one which presents the 'existential' war with the West as a natural situation for both society and the state. According to the official narrative, there is no alternative to Putin's candidacy, which enjoys the support of all 'genuine Russians' (some unofficial reports argue that he is expected to win at least 80% of the vote in the coming election), while his critics are presented as traitors, enemies or foreign agents.
- The response from some voters to Nadezhdin's candidacy (residents of several cities and towns spent many hours queuing up to sign his support lists) did not result from particularly deep familiarity with this politician or even any conviction that the Kremlin would let him obtain a good result in the election. It should be interpreted as a manifestation of their need to voice their opposition to the war in the only way formally allowed by the law. In any case doing so is associated with considerable risk, as anyone thus formally opposing Russia's 'patriotic' invasion of Ukraine is expected to provide their personal details. It seems highly likely that Nadezhdin's support lists will be used to repress those who backed him, and thus to intimidate the electorate during the election.