

Putin Officially Registered as Candidate for March Election



Russian President Vladimir Putin talks with awarded Russian servicemen at the St. George Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow, December 8, 2023.

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's election commission on Monday formally registered President Vladimir Putin as a candidate for the March presidential election, a vote in which he's all but certain to win another six-year term in office.

Putin, 71, is running as an independent, but he retains tight control over Russia's political system that he has established during 24 years in power.

In 2018, Putin also ran as an independent, snubbing the United Russia

party that nominated him to run in 2012. With his approval ratings hovering around 80 percent, Putin is far more popular than United Russia.

The Central Election Commission formally cleared Putin for the race after reviewing 315,000 signatures gathered by his campaign from all 89 regions of Russia. Russian election law requires independent candidates to present at least 300,000 signatures to get on the ballot.

The commission already has ap-

proved three other candidates who were nominated by parties represented in parliament and weren't required to collect signatures: Nikolai Kharitonov of the Communist Party, Leonid Slutsky of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and Vladislav Davankov of the New People Party.

All three parties have been largely supportive of the Kremlin's policies. Kharitonov ran against Putin in 2004, finishing a distant second.

Boris Nadezhdin, a 60-year-old liberal politician who serves as a local legislator in a town near Moscow, is also seeking to run. He has openly called for a halt to the conflict in Ukraine and starting a dialogue with the West.

Thousands of Russians have lined up across the country to leave their signatures in support of Nadezhdin's candidacy to allow him to qualify for the race.

The Central Election Commission is expected to review Nadezhdin's papers later this week to decide whether to register him for the race.

Under a constitutional reform that he engineered, Putin is eligible to seek two more six-year terms, potentially allowing him to remain in power until 2036.

Secret EU Plan to Sabotage Hungary's Economy Revealed



EU Leaders may consider invoking the option of kicking Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán out of the EU voting process.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) — Officials in Brussels have reportedly drawn up a secret plan to sabotage Hungary's economy if Viktor Orbán decides this week to again block a €50 billion support package for Ukraine.

The plan, reported by the Financial Times, reflects the fury mounting across European capitals at the Hungarian prime minister, who leads the bloc's most pro-Russia state.

The FT said the strategy involved targeting Hungary's economy, weakening its currency and reducing investor confidence.

Orbán blocked the €50 billion in Ukraine funds in December, forcing an emergency leaders meeting to be scheduled on Thursday to revisit the matter.

According to the FT, the docu-

ment declares that "in the case of no agreement in the February 1 [summit], other heads of state and government would publicly declare that in the light of the unconstructive behavior of the Hungarian PM ... they cannot imagine that [EU funds would be provided to Budapest]."

Sources on Monday said EU capitals were still hopeful of a deal with Orbán and see the leak as a high-risk political move that could backfire. The Hungarian currency, the forint, depreciated by 0.7% on Monday, briefly down to a low against the euro last seen in October.

Hungary's economy is heavily reliant on the single market, with nearly all its exports going across the border to neighboring countries. According to European Commission

data, intra-EU trade accounts for 78% of Hungary's exports (Germany 28%, Romania, Slovakia, Austria and Italy all 5%), while 3% goes to the U.S. and 3% to the UK.

The U.S. has already tried to use funds as a tool to force Hungary into line on policies and the application of the rule of law, a basic requirement of membership of the bloc.

János Bóka, Hungary's EU minister, told the FT that his country "does not give in to pressure" and there was no connection between Ukraine and general access to EU funds. "Hungary has and will continue to participate constructively in the negotiations," he said.

On Monday he wrote on X: "The document, drafted by Brussels bureaucrats only confirms what the Hungarian government has been saying for a long time: access to EU funds is used for political blackmailing by Brussels."

On Friday it emerged that several member states were pushing for a triggering of article 7 of the treaty of the European Union to strip Hungary of voting rights if Orbán continues to block EU decisions.

Such is the concern about Budapest's maneuvers that the European Council president, Charles Michel, abandoned his plans to step down in July amid fears that Orbán could take the chair at summits until a new leader was found.

One diplomat warned that using article 7 was a last resort and should not be used despite the anger with Hungary.

Racial Profiling by Police 'Everyday Occurrence' in Japan

TOKYO (AFP) -- Racial profiling by police is an "everyday occurrence" in Japan, one of three foreign-born residents who sued the government over the issue on Monday said.

In the first lawsuit of its kind, the three men accused the police of having repeatedly questioned them because of their ethnicity or appearance.

They are each seeking 3.3 million yen (\$22,300) in compensation.

"A lot of apathy here has allowed people like me to be abused and mistreated," one of the plaintiffs, an African American in his 40s who gave his name as Maurice S, told reporters.

"This is an everyday occurrence," he said. "We have to do something to prevent that for the future generations."

Despite rising immigration, foreign-born residents account for only 2.3 percent of Japan's population, one of the lowest shares in the OECD.

Maurice, who lives with family members who are Japanese citizens, said he has been questioned 16 or 17 times by police during his decade in Japan.

Officers "know that they can waste my time", he said. Japan's National Police Agency (NPA) could not imme-

diately comment on the case.

Another of the plaintiffs, a Pacific islander in his 50s called Matthew who is a permanent resident of Japan, has been questioned about 100 times, according to his lawyers.

Matthew said these experiences had caused him to withdraw socially.

"Every time I finish work, I'm hiding in my house... because I don't want to face another police (encounter)," he said outside the Tokyo District Court.

The third plaintiff, a man born in Pakistan who has been a Japanese citizen since the age of 13, said he has been questioned more than a dozen times, including once in front of his house.

Although lawsuits have been filed in the past about excessive questioning by police, this is the first one regarding racial profiling during questioning, lawyers for the three men said.

In 2021, the NPA spotted "six inappropriate cases of police questioning even though officers had no intention of discrimination based on race or nationality," a senior agency official told parliament in 2022.

The NPA continues to educate officers to respect human rights, the official said at the time.

'National Scandal': Mental Health Patients 'Raped' at UK Hospitals



Multiple patients and their families have spoken about their stories of sexual assault and abuse while locked in mental health units.

LONDON (Independent) -- Tens of thousands of sexual assaults and incidents have been reported in NHS-run mental health hospitals as a "national scandal" of sexual abuse of patients on psychiatric wards can be revealed.

Almost 20,000 reports of sexual incidents in the last five years have been made in more than half of NHS mental health trusts, according to exclusive data uncovered in a joint investigation and podcast by The Independent and Sky News.

The shocking findings, triggered by one woman's dramatic story of escape following a sexual assault in hospital revealed in a podcast, Patient 11, show NHS trusts are failing to report the majority of incidents to the police and are not meeting vital standards designed to protect the UK's most vulnerable patients from sexual harm.

Throughout the 18-month investigation, multiple patients and their families spoke to The Independent about their stories of sexual assault and abuse while locked in mental health units.

Rivkah Grant, 34, was targeted by an NHS staff member and sexually abused, while Stephanie Tutty, 28, made similar allegations. Alexis Quinn, a former GB swimming star, alleged

she was sexually assaulted twice — once when she was forced to sleep on a male ward and a second time on a mixed gender ward.

Dr Lade Smith, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, called the findings "horrendous", while shadow health secretary Wes Streeting said it was a "wake-up call" for the government.

"It is deeply troubling to see that so many incidents in mental health settings go unreported," Dr Smith said.

Dame Vera Baird, the former victims' commissioner, said attacks by people who were supposed to care for the vulnerable were particularly troubling.

"The results of this investigation are a national scandal," she said. "The [figures on assaults] from staff on patients are the height of concern because it may mean that there is insufficient scrutiny and insufficient vetting of people coming into hospitals."

"These people are going to be let loose on the most vulnerable of people, whose testimony may not be believed when they say something."

Freedom of information figures show that patients are at risk from staff in numerous hospitals, with more than 300 incidents reported on patients over the five-year period.

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — Complaints of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian discrimination and hate in the U.S. rose by about 180% in the three months after Oct. 7, an advocacy group said on Monday. Rights advocates have noted a rise in Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian bias in the U.S. and elsewhere since the eruption of war in the Middle East. Among incidents in the U.S. that raised alarm were a November shooting in Vermont where three students of Palestinian descent were shot and the fatal stabbing of a 6-year-old Palestinian American child in Illinois in October. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) said on Monday it has received 3,578 complaints during the last three months of 2023, amid what it called "an ongoing wave of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian hate." The figure is a 178% rise from complaints in the same period from a year earlier. Complaints of employment discrimination led the list with 662 instances; hate crimes and hate incidents were reported 472 times; and education discrimination 448 times, the organization said.

KYIV, Ukraine (AFP) — Ukraine said on Monday its troops were trying to expand their foothold on the Russian-occupied eastern bank of the Dnipro river, despite fierce resistance from Moscow's forces. Ukraine will "continue measures aimed at expanding its bridgehead" on the left (eastern) bank of the Dnipro, the army said in a daily briefing. "Despite significant losses, the enemy continues to try to drive our units from their positions," it said. Both Moscow and Kyiv have been entrenched on opposite sides of the vast river since November 2022, when Russian forces retreated from the western bank. The Ukrainian air force said it downed eight Russian attack drones across the country overnight on Monday, including in western regions. Russia fired rockets at Ukrainian army positions and civilian areas a total of 86 times over the past day, and launched at least seven missile strikes, Ukraine's army said.

MANILA (AFP) — CNN Philippines will stop operations from January 31 due to "significant financial losses", its owner announced Monday, in the latest blow for the media industry in the Southeast Asian nation. The broadcaster began operating in the Philippines in 2015 as a franchise of CNN, delivering mainly English-language news on free-to-air, cable and pay television. Staff were told Monday of the decision to shut down news and production operations on all platforms. "The decision follows significant financial losses sustained over the past years, despite rigorous efforts to adapt and innovate in a rapidly evolving and challenging media landscape," CNN Philippines-owner Nine Media Corporation said, without providing details. "We are aware of the impact of this closure on our valued employees and talents, we assure all affected staff will be provided with severance packages." The closure will affect around 300 employees, a member of staff told AFP on the condition of anonymity.

North Korean Leader Oversees Launch of Missile From Sub



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends a submarine-launched cruise missile test with military officials at an undisclosed location in North Korea in this picture released by the Korean Central News Agency on January 28, 2024.

SEOUL (AFP) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw the test launch of a new strategic cruise missile from a submarine, state media said Monday, the latest tension-raising move by the nuclear-armed state.

Pyeongyang has accelerated weapons testing in the new year, including tests of what it called an "underwater nuclear weapon system" and a solid-fueled hypersonic ballistic missile.

The two Pulhwasal-3-31 missiles "flew in the sky above the East Sea ... to hit the island target" on Sunday, state-run news agency KCNA reported, adding that Kim had "guided" the launch.

The Pulhwasal-3-31 is a new generation of strategic cruise missiles that Pyongyang said it had only tested for the first time on Wednesday, firing multiple missiles toward the Yellow Sea.

Unlike their ballistic counterparts, the testing of cruise missiles is not banned under current UN sanctions against Pyongyang.

Cruise missiles tend to be jet-propelled and fly at a lower altitude than more sophisticated ballistic missiles, making them harder to detect and intercept.

KCNA reported the "submarine-launched strategic cruise missiles" (SLCM) were in the air for 7,421 seconds and 7,445 seconds -- approximately two hours -- but did not say how far they flew or whether they had been

launched from above or below the water.

North Korea's exact sea-based launch capabilities remain unclear, and previous tests were carried out from older vessels, including from a submerged platform, rather than an actual submarine.

Photos carried by state media showed a missile soaring up into the sky from the water leaving a huge trail of white smoke, making it unclear the type of platform it was being fired from.

In March last year, North Korea launched two SLCMs that flew 1,500 kilometers (930 miles), according to Pyongyang, putting all of South Korea and much of Japan within range.

Kim expressed "great satisfaction" over Sunday's test, KCNA said, "which is of strategic significance in carrying out the plan... for modernizing the army which aims at building a powerful naval force."

The North Korean leader separately inspected "the building of a nuclear submarine" and discussed issues related to the construction of other new warships, the report added without giving details.

Improving the country's naval power was one of the key decisions reached at the year-end party meeting, and given Sunday's launch was personally overseen by Kim, analysts say it signals the direction of Pyongyang's defense policy this year.

MANILA (Reuters) -- The Philippines on Monday denied China had a "temporary special arrangement" with Manila to allow the delivery of supplies to Philippine troops occupying a disputed South China Sea reef, calling it "a figment of imagination". The Chinese coastguard said on Saturday it had temporarily allowed the Philippines to provide food and water to soldiers stationed at the BRP Sierra Madre, a vessel grounded in 1999 at the Second Thomas Shoal, 190 km (118 miles) off Palawan province, to assert Manila's territorial claims. "This is a figment of the imagination of the Chinese coastguard. There is no truth to this," National Security Council spokesperson Jonathan Malaya told state-run broadcaster PTV-4. The Chinese coastguard said the Philippines air-dropped supplies to the navy vessel on Jan. 21. Malaya did not confirm nor deny the airdrop, but said supplying troops was his country's right.

LONDON (AFP) -- The UK will introduce legislation to ban disposable e-cigarettes in order to tackle a rise in youth vaping, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was to announce Monday. The government cited recent figures showing the proportion of vapers under the age of 18 who use disposables has increased almost ninefold in the last two years. Sunak's government also plans to introduce fines for shops in England and Wales that sell vapes illegally to children. Health experts welcomed the proposal, with Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty saying the legislation would have "a major public health impact across many future generations". Sunak last year proposed plans to eventually make the UK a smoke-free nation. His proposal would make it an offence for anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 to be sold tobacco products -- effectively raising the smoking age by a year each year until it applies to the whole population, a statement by Sunak's Downing Street office said.

NICE, France (AFP) -- Claims by a former close confidant of Monaco's royal family that part of its fortune is placed in tax havens have rocked the affluent city state, in the latest scandal facing the palace under Prince Albert II. The new controversy erupted after French newspaper Le Monde last week published the allegations, which it said were based on detailed notes the palace's wealth manager made while working for the family. Claude Palmero was for more than two decades in charge of managing the palace's assets, first for Rainier III, the husband of American actress Grace Kelly, and then their son Prince Albert when he became ruler of Monaco in 2005. But the wealth manager, who took over from his father in 2001, was unexpectedly forced to step down last year, and he has since tried to sue the monarch over his dismissal.