

Russia's Parliamentary Elections

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On September 18, 2016, Russians will go to the polls to elect the State Duma, the lower house of parliament. Russia's last parliamentary elections in December 2011 triggered a wave of protests against electoral fraud and heralded the rise of a revitalized opposition against the government of President Vladimir Putin. Five years later, expectations of democratic change have subsided. The ruling United Russia (UR) party is poised to win an even larger majority than before, with most other seats going to loyal opposition parties. Parties genuinely in opposition to the government are expected to win only a handful of seats.

Anticipated Results: More of the Same

Russians are [electing](#) 450 deputies to the Duma. Elections also will be held for a number of regional and local councils, as well as for some regional heads. Half the Duma deputies will be elected by proportional representation and half in first-past-the-post single-member districts. The 14 parties running are those that [received](#) at least 3% of the vote in the last election or hold at least one seat in a regional council (other parties technically could register after collecting 200,000 signatures, but no such registrations were approved).

The ruling UR party is expected to secure a decisive victory—possibly even a two-thirds majority (it currently enjoys a simple majority). The party traditionally polls lower than President Putin, who does not formally lead the party, but it has benefited from a [surge](#) in patriotic sentiment unleashed by Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russia's so-called defense of pro-Russian populations in eastern Ukraine, and appeals for national solidarity in the face of Western criticism. UR also has experienced a certain renewal in advance of elections; party [primaries](#) promoted the rise of many candidates new to national politics and eliminated a number of sitting deputies.

The Loyal Opposition

Besides UR, the three parties expected to gain the most seats are all currently in parliament and are known as the loyal opposition. These parties criticize the government, if not President Putin, but typically support its legislative initiatives. Two are longtime fixtures of Russian politics: the Communist Party (KPRF, led by Gennadiy Zyuganov) and the right-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR, led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy). The third, A Just Russia (led by Sergei Mironov), is a center-left party that flirted with the opposition in 2011-2012 before [returning](#) to the fold (and [expelling](#) some of its members who remained in opposition). In recent [polls](#), LDPR and KPRF enjoy around 15% support from among likely voters, and A Just Russia is expected to have enough support to clear a 5% electoral threshold to enter

parliament.

The Opposition: Weak and Fractured

Genuine opposition parties are expected to receive only a handful of seats. Only two, neither of which is in parliament, are eligible to compete: Yabloko (identified with its former longtime chairman Grigory Yavlinsky) and PARNAS (led by former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and, previously, Boris Nemtsov, slain in 2015). Both parties consider themselves European-style liberal democratic parties, though other parties have criticized PARNAS for including at least one [populist firebrand](#) near the top of its list. Each party has a relatively low level of support in the [polls](#) (less than 3%).

In addition, 18 single-member races are being contested by [candidates](#) representing the Open Russia movement, founded by former oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who served 10 years in prison on charges deemed by the opposition and most observers to be politically motivated.

Another prominent opposition leader, anticorruption activist and 2013 Moscow mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny, is [barred](#) from running due to two criminal convictions. Navalny supporters and most outside observers deem the convictions politically motivated (Navalny received suspended sentences for both convictions). Navalny's Party of Progress had its registration revoked last year, ostensibly for technical reasons, and is unable to participate in the election.

Opposition fragmentation is an issue. Opposition leaders [protect](#) their individual brands and fear these brands could be damaged by formal unification with other parties (electoral blocs have been [banned](#) since 2005). Last year, Navalny's Party of Progress joined with PARNAS and others in a "Democratic Coalition," which was to run candidates under the PARNAS banner. The coalition soon ran into difficulties, however. It was [barred](#) from registering candidates in September 2015 regional elections, and this spring the coalition finally [collapsed](#) after PARNAS leader Kasyanov was caught in a scandal involving hidden video footage of an affair with a party colleague.

Increased Government Control

Since the last election period, the Russian government has taken [measures](#) that are likely to strengthen the victory of UR and minimize opposition gains across the country. In addition to the government's tight control over the registration process, state-controlled media and government officials have subjected opposition leaders to a barrage of negative publicity, [branding](#) them as agents of the West. Restrictions on mass demonstrations have tightened. A centrally controlled [redistricting](#) process has led to the carving up of urban centers that lean toward the opposition. UR's financial and administrative resources across the countryside are expected to [help](#) the party win more seats via single-member races than it would in a purely proportional contest.

The government also has used its "[foreign agent](#)" law to undermine the reputation of civil society actors that could influence public perceptions of elections. In 2014, Russia's main domestic election monitoring organization, Golos, was the first organization [classified](#) as a foreign agent. In early September 2016, Russia's most reputable polling organization, the Levada Center, was also [branded](#) a foreign agent.

Stable for Now

Russia's parliamentary elections are not likely to lead to a new round of democratic revival. Russia's ongoing economic difficulties have [begun](#) to lead to small-scale protests across the country. For now, however, these protests do not show signs of catalyzing any new kind of political movement. Meanwhile, within the Russian government, the trend is less one of accommodating a broader array of political elites (as the UR primaries would suggest) than [tightening](#) President Putin's direct control over a hierarchy of loyal followers. Changes to the system may be occurring, but mostly from within.