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What you should know about Russia's parliamentary elections

The electorate has been left with little real choice in the State Duma ballot, critics say.



The Kremlin has excluded swaths of critical voices from participating in the parliamentary election [File: Alexander Ermochenko/Reuters]



By Mansur Mirovalev

16 Sep 2021

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For centuries, the bear has been Russia's totem animal.

It is also a mascot of United Russia, the governing party in the State Duma, the 450-seat lower house of parliament, that obediently and unanimously stands behind everything President Vladimir Putin says and does.

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United Russia currently has a supermajority with 334 seats, which means a very prompt adoption and approval of any bill, budget and political step Putin wants.

But independent observers, international monitors and Western governments do not believe the majority was the result of fair election victories – and consider most parliamentary votes under Putin's rule to be rigged.

Just like a bear, United Russia, which largely consists of officials and businessmen, is far from gracious.

In fact, it is so unpopular and politically clumsy that Putin has for years distanced himself from it.

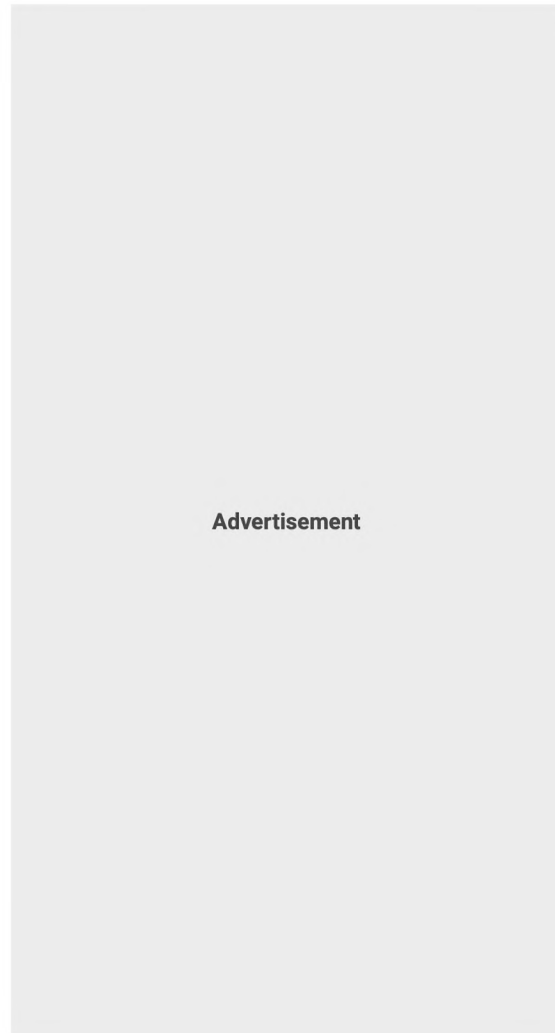


Putin, who has been in power as either president or prime minister since 1999, helped found United Russia but is not a member [File: Mikhail Voskresensky/Sputnik/Kremlin/Pool Photo via AP]

Jailed opposition leader Alexey Navalny has called United Russia “a party of crooks and thieves”, and despite all the efforts of Kremlin-controlled television networks, its current approval rating stands at just 27 percent, according to a survey conducted in March by the Levada Center polling organisation.

Its former head, ex-Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, whose last name means “bear”, was sacked and demoted by Putin last year.

Putin then appointed his immensely popular defence chief and possible successor [Sergey Shoigu](#) to lead the party in the three-day parliamentary vote, which concludes on September 19.



Putin needs United Russia to win – because after last year’s “nullification” of his current and previous presidential terms, he needs another parliament supermajority awaiting his re-election in 2024.

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How does the vote work?

Half of the Duma’s seats are filled by direct election.

But each voter makes a second choice on their ballots for the second half of the chamber’s seats, as part of a process known as “party lists”.

This means voters will pick from one of 14 parties to send another lawmaker to the Duma.

However, only four of these parties are relevant – United Russia and the so-called “systemic opposition”, a trio of parties critics say are nominally opposed to United Russia and whose purpose is to create an illusion of

political plurality.

The biggest and oldest of them is the Communist Party, led by Gennady Zyuganov.

He leads annual marches to the Red Square mausoleum of Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin and idolises his successor, Josef Stalin.

However, the Communists mostly back Putin's initiatives, and their ageing support base – low-income retirees who are nostalgic about their Communist-era youth – has limits.

The third-largest faction in the Duma is the far-right, nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), which has 40 seats.

Its leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, has been accused of anti-Semitism and wanted Moscow to use nuclear weapons against Chechen separatists, “retake” Alaska from the US – the czars sold the remote peninsula in 1867, and annex Finland and Poland, which used to be part of the Russian empire.

His antics are, however, widely seen by observers as a political smokescreen to lure disgruntled nationalists – and to make Putin appear a balanced, wise patriarch.



Russia's parliamentary election is not widely expected to change the country's political complexion [Maxim Shemetov/Reuters]

The third and the least significant “systemic” party is A Just Russia – a nominally socialist party that promises to nationalise Russia's oil industry and triple the salaries of government employees – which has 23 seats in the Duma.

Even though its leader Sergey Mironov is a longtime Putin ally, the party has an approval rating of 7.8 per cent, according to a poll conducted in February by the state-run VTsIOM pollster.

In an attempt to attract voters, A Just Russia merged this year with Patriots for Truth, a nascent nationalist group led by Zakhar Prilepin, a novelist-turned strongman who led a squad of pro-Moscow separatists in southeastern Ukraine and confessed to killing “lots and lots of people”.



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It also [enlisted](#) Steven Seagal, a washed-out Hollywood celebrity mired in sexual harassment allegations in the United States.

Squashing dissent

Last year, Putin’s oldest ally and president of neighbouring Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, was nearly toppled.

Thousands marched in the capital, Minsk, for weeks to protest his sixth victory in an August 9, 2020, presidential vote.

In response, Belarusian authorities [arrested](#), beat and tortured thousands, according to rights groups.

Putin seems to have learned Lukashenko’s lesson, an international campaign manager said.

The Kremlin “purges opposition, especially after Minsk, to make sure such a scenario is not repeated in Russia,” Vitali Shkliarov told Al Jazeera.

“In order not to beget protest and discontent, [the Kremlin] is making the vote sterile, and that’s why they’re using the only two remaining mechanisms – vote rigging or barring [opposition candidates],” he said.

Barred from the vote this year are Navalny and his supporters, as well as hundreds of other independent candidates throughout Russia who have been subject to arrests, intimidation and smear campaigns.

Electoral interference

As to vote-rigging, in Russia, ballot stuffing was documented tens of thousands of times before the Kremlin outlawed most independent election monitors.

“Carousels”, when groups of voters are bussed from one polling station to another, voting dozens of times, are also a common feature.



There will be three days of voting as part of Russia’s parliamentary election, ending on September 19 [File: Dmitri Lovetsky/AP]

This year, millions of Russians will use an e-voting system that critics claim is non-transparent and easy to manipulate but Moscow says will boost turnout, and the speed and accuracy of processing votes.

“Our school’s principal said we have to get registered, vote for United Russia or face dismissal,” Oleg Pritulin, an English teacher at a public school in southeastern Moscow, told Al Jazeera.

After the principal’s order, he considered quitting the job – his second source of income on top of work as a translator – because he “doesn’t want to be part of this cruel farce”.

Most of his colleagues, however, fully depend on their teaching paychecks and the extra income provided by tutoring.

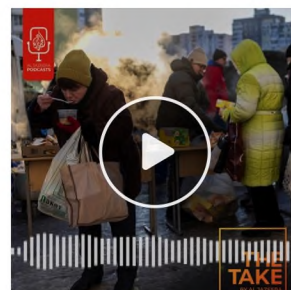
According to Kyiv-based analyst Aleksey Kushch, the Russian election is like a “tasteless breakfast at a summer camp for young pioneers, without any choice”.

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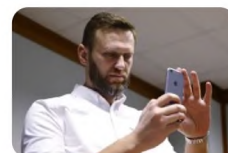


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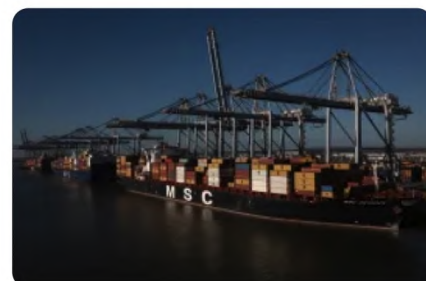
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