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Yet Another Sham Election in Russia

The Upcoming Ballot for the Ninth State Duma

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So far, 2026 is not proving a good year for the Putin regime. The front line in Ukraine is barely moving, Ukrainian drones and missiles are striking targets deep inside Russian territory, the economy is faltering and public sentiment is deteriorating. Under these difficult conditions, the Kremlin administration has to engineer another victory for the ruling United Russia party, as the State Duma elections are due to take place from 18 to 20 September. Yet the Russian parliament is scarcely able to fulfil its function as a source of legitimacy in Putin's personalised dictatorship. This is evident both from the chronic weakness of the parties loyal to the regime and from the farcical circumstances surrounding the exclusion of the Yabloko party from the election.

From 18 to 20 September 2026, "elections" will be held in Russia. The population is being called upon to vote on the composition of the State Duma, the national parliament, for its ninth legislative term (2026–2031). A total of 225 seats are to be allocated via direct constituencies and another 225 via party lists. In addition, 11 governors, 39 regional parliaments and around a dozen municipal councils will be newly elected in the 83 constituent entities of the Russian Federation and in six occupied Ukrainian territories (Crimea, Sevastopol, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson). Russia has been holding elections in occupied territories in Ukraine — in breach of international law — since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The forthcoming Duma election is the second national poll, after the 2024 presidential election, to take place since the full-scale

war of aggression against Ukraine began in February 2022. And it is the third national election since Putin's constitutional reform of 2020.

When Putin decided to launch a large-scale attack on Ukraine, the fate of his regime became inextricably linked to the outcome of the war. During the first year and a half, military problems and setbacks repeatedly sparked domestic unrest — from the mass exodus and protests following the declaration of partial mobilisation in September 2022 to the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023. With the transition to a war of attrition in 2023, that dynamic faded. Since the spring of 2026, however, the state has been unable to shield its own population from the war in the face of massive Ukrainian air strikes. The economy is facing a deepening structural crisis, and the cost of living is rising relentlessly. Petrol has



become scarce, a large number of warehouses belonging to Wildberries and Ozon (the online retailers that dominate the Russian market) have gone up in flames and mobile internet has repeatedly been shut down for security reasons. As a result, public sentiment has deteriorated dramatically. At the same time, fears are rife that another mobilisation will follow the end of the election on 20 September.

Since the beginning of 2026, Putin's approval rating among the population — the key indicator of the regime's stability — has fallen from 85 per cent to as low as 65 per cent (depending on the poll). An increasing number of people in the country have come to view the economic and socio-economic situation, the petrol shortages and the state's handling of the internet as problems. Life satisfaction is declining, while anxiety about the future is growing. For the first time since the Wagner Group mutiny, signs of unrest are emerging within the ruling class. Doubts about the purpose and winnability of the war are becoming increasingly widespread.

These developments must be viewed in a nuanced manner. According to polls taken by the independent Levada Centre in July 2026, 62 per cent of the population supported the start of peace negotiations, while only 28 per cent were firmly in favour of continuing the war. However, should negotiations prove impossible, 56 per cent would back more intensive military strikes against Ukraine; only 25 per cent believed that Russia should make concessions to the neighbouring country and its Western supporters. Thus, the majority of the Russian population remains unwilling to abandon imperialist ambitions, oppose the war of aggression or strive for genuine peace with Ukraine. This is the context in which the shift in the social climate is currently taking place.

In the spring, rumours were circulating about a conflict between the domestic intelligence service, the FSB, and the so-called political bloc of the Kremlin administration led by Sergei Kiriyenko, who is responsible for election management. Independent

media reported that the FSB was pushing for the election to be postponed (and thus, perhaps, for it to be cancelled altogether). The accuracy of those reports cannot be verified. However, they can be taken as a fairly reliable indicator of a certain degree of incertitude within the regime.

The pseudo-constitutional façade of the Duma election

At the closing plenary session of the eighth State Duma on 27 July 2026, Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin praised the harmony within the parliament. He noted that during the outgoing legislative term, 26 per cent of all successful legislative proposals had been tabled on a cross-party basis, which signified a tripling of that figure compared with the previous convocation. Moreover, 68.5 per cent of all laws passed had been supported by all parliamentary groups. According to Volodin, the Duma had three priorities that it followed in its work: implementing Putin's government programmes, supporting the "special military operation" in Ukraine and (in last place) representing the interests of the population. Volodin concluded his speech with the words: "There are many parties, but only one Russia." He went on to chant "Russia — Putin — Victory" several times to a standing ovation from the deputies. For his part, the leader, thus extolled, praised the Duma for its contribution to the "consolidation of national sovereignty" in what he called fateful times. The deputies had fully lived up to their status as "true representatives of the people". Putin and Volodin provided an accurate description of the role played by the State Duma in the Russian dictatorship. It is not a place where interests are represented; rather, it serves to simulate pluralism and the rule of law while, at the same time, producing legitimacy through acclamation.

To ensure the Duma can fulfil these functions adequately, parliamentary elections at the federal level — like all other elections in the country — have been

manipulated ever more systematically since the 2000s. A key indicator of this trend is the constant adapting of electoral legislation to the needs of the Russian autocracy. While the 2020 Constitution formally strengthened the State Duma's position vis-à-vis the president, it further restricted the right to stand for election. Candidates for Duma seats are now barred from holding dual citizenship, a residence permit issued by another country or bank accounts abroad. In spring 2020, the seventh State Duma (2016–2021) not only facilitated the implementation of a constitutional reform that was invalid according to the rule of law. It also served as the stage for a political charade that, in effect, annulled Putin's previous terms in office in order to pave the way for him to serve another two terms (theoretically until 2036).

The eighth State Duma introduced legislative amendments that closely intertwined electoral legislation with the state's repressive apparatus. Individuals convicted of "extremism" are now not only barred from standing for election until they have served their sentence or had it quashed; they are also prohibited from running for office for five years thereafter. Similarly, "foreign agents" are barred from standing for election and can no longer perform any role related to the electoral process. The Russian Ministry of Justice currently includes more than 900 organisations and individuals on its "register of foreign agents". The number of those accused of "extremism" is not made public. Taken together, the restrictions affect or threaten thousands of people who are being persecuted by the Russian state, whether in Russia or in exile, including the entire political opposition and independent civil society. A photograph posted years ago of the opposition politician Alexei Navalny – who was murdered in 2024 while in custody – is sufficient grounds to be stripped of one's rights and sent to a penal camp for a long period.

The powers of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), which is headed by one of Putin's long-standing confidantes, Ella Pamfilova, have been expanded during the

eighth State Duma. Since 2023, the institution has been responsible for organising elections under a state of emergency. This means that the regions along the Russian-Ukrainian border and the occupied Ukrainian territories can be included in the electoral process, despite the ongoing war. Although the CEC is also responsible for enabling citizens living abroad to take part in elections, Pamfilova declared in mid-August 2026 that people who had turned their backs on Russia and "betrayed" it should "go to hell". She called on the next State Duma to pass legislation banning the participation in elections of "foreign agents" living abroad.

The CEC has invited 103 states in Russia's immediate neighbourhood, Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as 12 non-Western regional and national organisations, to send election observers. The speaker of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, has made the same request to the parliaments of friendly states. The 2018 presidential election was the last election in Russia to which the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent an observer mission. Russia is endeavouring to create an alternative system of international election monitoring. At the same time, Golos, which was Russia's leading independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the field of election monitoring, announced its dissolution in 2025 owing to state repression. Moreover, journalists' access to polling stations was further restricted during the last parliamentary term. In today's Russia, independent election monitoring or election reporting is impossible.

As part of an amendment to the law regulating the use of artificial intelligence in election campaigning, a ban was introduced in May 2026 on the use of AI-generated images and voices of "deceased or fictional persons" during election campaigns. This requirement poses a real threat to all parties. The far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) is particularly affected as its profile is inextricably linked to that of its former leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who

died in 2022. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) campaigns extensively not only through references to the Great Patriotic War but also using images of Lenin, Stalin and other historical figures.

Voting rounds in Russia last three days. That timeframe was introduced in 2020 for the referendum on the new Constitution, the reason cited being the social distancing rules imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, this arrangement was enshrined in law as an option and has since been applied in all elections. The extension of the voting period makes it easier to manipulate voter turnout through administrative pressure and to falsify results at local polling stations. Golos documented such interference in all elections held between 2020 and its dissolution five years later. Electronic voting, which will be available in 33 Russian regions from September 2026, opens up similar avenues. Its use has been systematically expanded since 2019 and, with it, the possibility of influencing voter turnout and election results.

Act Three in the fight against the anti-war opposition

Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, repression and manipulation have been geared towards nipping in the bud any opposition to the war. The farcical events surrounding the Yabloko party at the start of the Duma election campaign must be understood as part of a meandering conflict between the Putin dictatorship and that section of the Russian population critical of both the regime and the war. Yabloko was running on a programme that comprised seven objectives: “For peace and freedom! For a life without fear! For a ceasefire agreement, diplomacy and peace! Our aim is to prevent a nuclear war! For a Russia free from fear and political repression! For the protection of human life, for respect, dignity and well-being! Our goal is a thriving, democratic Russia!” From a Ukrainian perspective, these slogans would not have constituted a basis for peace; but in the Russian

context, they made Yabloko the only political force to openly oppose the war.

Yabloko (Russian for “apple”) has been part of the country’s political landscape since 1993. The liberal party was last represented in the State Duma from 1999 to 2003. Thereafter, like other liberal-democratic forces, it was pushed into political irrelevance by increasing manipulation. In the 2010s, it garnered between 1 per cent and 2 per cent of the vote in Duma and presidential elections. However, Yabloko still holds seats in the regional parliaments of Pskov, Saint Petersburg and Karelia and was therefore able to register for the State Duma election without having to collect signatures nationwide. Other opposition forces have repeatedly accused the party of benefiting from a certain proximity to the Kremlin and thus serving as a liberal fig leaf for the Russian autocracy. Grigory Yavlinsky, a founding member of the party, maintains direct contact with the Russian leader; his last confirmed meeting with Putin took place in October 2023.

But this supposed protective shield has not prevented Yabloko from coming under increasing pressure since 2025. Leading party politicians have been sentenced – in some cases, to several years’ imprisonment – for “discrediting the army”, “using extremist symbols” and similar such “offences”. Nikolai Rybakov, the party leader, was handed an administrative fine at the end of 2025 for “extremist symbolism” after having expressed his sympathy with Alexei Navalny’s family in a social media post.

When, at the end of July, the CEC authorised Yabloko’s participation in the election, it probably assumed that the party would remain marginal. However, interest in Yabloko soared immediately after its registration, with the number of visits to the party’s website and related internet searches skyrocketing. Sociological studies estimated Yabloko’s potential at between 5 per cent and 20 per cent of the vote. Across the country, people were talking, singing and writing poetry about apples on social media: apples were being depicted, sliced, eaten and declared the favourite

fruit. Yulia Navalnaya, Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza and other opposition politicians in exile all voiced their support for Yabloko.

This unexpected response set the state's well-oiled machinery of repression in motion. On 7 August 2026, the pro-establishment parties represented in the Duma – the CPRF, LDPR and A Just Russia – called for Yabloko to be excluded from the election. The same day, an application to the Supreme Court in Moscow was lodged by the far-right party Rodina (Motherland). The allegations, which covered the entire arsenal of repressive laws enacted over the past 15 years, ranged from foreign funding through unauthorised online advertising and copyright infringement, to “extremist statements” and “LGBTIQ propaganda”.

On 10 August, the court ordered that Yabloko be excluded from taking part in the election. The presiding judge was Vyacheslav Kirillov, who has also been responsible for, among other things, the 2021 ban on the Russian human rights organisation Memorial International. From this smorgasbord of allegations, he selected “foreign funding, advertising financed outside the election campaign fund and copyright infringements” as the grounds for his ruling. Outside the courthouse, around 500 people, most of whom were young, protested in support of Yabloko. One week later, on 17 August, the court rejected the party's appeal. Protests broke out once again, this time resulting in dozens of arrests. The CEC ordered Yabloko to be removed from the ballot papers but did not alter the numbering of the other parties. United Russia, which remains in the number one slot, is now followed by the LDPR in third place. Also on 17 August, Lev Shlosberg, Yabloko's deputy chairman, was sentenced in Pskov to 11 years and one month in a penal colony on charges of “repeatedly discrediting the armed forces”, “spreading disinformation about the war” and violations of the law on “foreign agents”.

Yabloko has been dealt a severe blow and the party's future is uncertain. After the election, the Kremlin could pursue the

allegations of extremism brought against Yabloko, criminalise the party and have it banned. Or it could continue to exclude Yabloko candidates one by one from national and regional elections. This would mean that by 2028, after seven years without participating in elections, the party would lose the legal basis for its existence.

The Yabloko episode shows that, amid the tensions within the country, the potential for political mobilisation around anti-war positions is rising rather than falling – and that the Kremlin has misjudged the situation once again. This is now the third such incident since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. In the early days of the invasion, the regime crushed the burgeoning anti-war movement in the country. Two years later, Boris Nadezhdin and Yekaterina Duntsova were barred from the 2024 presidential election; both had intended to stand on an anti-war platform and had similarly caused quite a stir (see SWP-Comment 9/2024).

In summer 2026, Nadezhdin and his party, the Citizens' Initiative, made another electoral bid by attempting to stand in the Duma election. He was declared a “foreign agent” in July and fled to France in early August. With every flare-up of social opposition to the war, the state tightens the screw of repression a little further. From the Kremlin's perspective, the risk associated with holding elections persists. But for the time being, the regime – or rather Putin as central decision-maker – appears keen to stick with them, not least to signal that the situation in the country remains stable.

Pluralism by the grace of the Kremlin: The systemic parties

Over two decades, the Kremlin has shaped a “party system” designed to simulate representativeness. The state administration controls this system by playing all the parties off against one another and ensuring the dominance of the ruling party, United Russia. Following the exclusion of Yabloko,

it is only the five “systemic parties” already represented in the parliament — out of the 11 parties originally registered for the Duma election — that stand any chance of being admitted to the next Duma.

United Russia: A giant in name only

The United Russia (UR) party is expected to emerge from the September election with yet another two-thirds majority of parliamentary seats. Founded in 2001, the party first held such a majority from 2007 to 2011 and again from 2016 until now, benefiting from Putin’s support. Although the Russian leader is not a party member, he promotes United Russia through appearances at party congresses and on tours of the country’s regions.

United Russia represents the nationalist-imperialist, state-paternalist and traditionalist agenda of the Putin dictatorship. The party pays homage to the leader’s rule and calls for total victory over Ukraine. Each of the top five names on the party’s list for the 2026 Duma election symbolises a cornerstone of Putin’s ideology: Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stands for imperialism and great-power ambitions; war correspondent Yevgeny Poddubny and Vladislav Golovin, leader of the organisation Yunarmiya (Young Army), for militarism; “Children’s Rights Commissioner” Maria Lvova-Belova, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children, for “traditional values” and patriarchy; and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin for technocratic state paternalism. Once again, the party chairman, former President Dmitry Medvedev, is not among the leading candidates. He is one of Russia’s most unpopular politicians. His aggressive and vociferous support for the “special military operation” currently makes him a liability for the regime. Moreover, the primaries held to select the candidates were marked by fierce conflicts, further damaging United Russia’s image.

United Russia has by far the strongest position going into the elections. Thanks

to massive support from the Kremlin administration over many years, it commands a dense network of regional and local branches and is thus visible throughout the country. The party also has a disproportionately large presence in the country’s state-controlled media coverage and on social media. Nevertheless, its approval rating is stagnating: in comparative polls featuring all parties, it attracts between 30 per cent and 40 per cent. But when respondents are asked — without any parties being named — which party offers convincing solutions to this or that problem, the figure falls below 20 per cent.

The contenders for second place: CPRF and LDPR

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia are largely Kremlin-controlled systemic parties. Both existed as early as the 1990s and are not simply regime creations. The CPRF retained a certain degree of autonomy until 2022. In the eighth State Duma, it formed the second-largest parliamentary group with 57 seats, having secured 18.9 per cent of the vote — an increase of around 5 percentage points compared with the 2016 Duma election. The party had successfully mobilised against the unpopular 2018 pension reform and had benefited most from Alexei Navalny’s calls on the public to support candidates from the systemic opposition in a bid to weaken United Russia. After February 2022, the CPRF lost the support of this segment of the electorate because it unreservedly backed the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the rhetoric of the CPRF, the war is depicted as a seamless continuation of the Great Patriotic War, which the Soviet Union waged against Nazi Germany. The party’s programme and visual imagery are characterised by socialist slogans and nostalgia for the Soviet era. From time to time, the CPRF criticises social injustices and the state’s social policy. Recently, several leading CPRF politicians were prosecuted for offences such as embezzlement and corruption and, in some

cases, for making statements critical of the war.

The far-right LDPR has been a nationalist firebrand since the 2000s. However, since the death in 2022 of its long-serving leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the party's profile and public presence have suffered. In the 2021 Duma election, its share of the vote halved to 7.5 per cent. Zhirinovskiy was succeeded by the uncharismatic Leonid Slutsky, who is favoured by the Kremlin. He carries little political weight of his own. As regards its programme, the LDPR espouses war-glorifying imperialism, anti-immigration ethnonationalism and racism, and ultra-conservative positions on social policy, as well as making socio-political demands. Slutsky's speeches consist mainly of tributes to his predecessor. In 2024, he stood as a presidential candidate under the slogan "Zhirinovskiy's cause lives on!"

Time and again, the Kremlin administration has supported the LDPR in order to weaken the CPRF. But recently, the party has come under greater pressure from above, too. Several leading LDPR politicians in the Russian regions have been convicted of corruption in the past few years, further weakening the party. In the political debate, the CPRF and the LDPR routinely criticise each other in a ritualised manner as "nationalist" and "communist", respectively. They compete for the Kremlin's favour and, in opinion polls, tend to take turns in coming second, behind United Russia — each polling around 10 per cent. On open-ended questions, however, the figure for both parties is much lower.

The spoilers in the system: A Just Russia and New People

Like the CPRF and the LDPR, A Just Russia (JR) and New People (NP) are Kremlin-controlled parties designed to cover different political positions. Following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, JR evolved from a moderate socialist force into an aggressive pro-war party. Under the slogan "Protect the Protectors", the party identifies support for those returning from the war as

its top priority for the 2026 Duma election campaign. It combines criticism of social inequality with anti-immigration sentiment and ultra-patriotic stances.

The New People party is a relatively new project. It was created by the Kremlin in 2020 to counter the growing support for Navalny. In 2021, it entered the State Duma from a standing start with 5.3 per cent of the vote. NP espouses liberal positions such as a market economy and competition, a pro-technology stance and digital self-determination, without questioning either the Putin regime or its war policy. It addresses issues of concern to the more liberal urban population, such as rampant domestic violence. In 2025, a female NP parliamentary deputy engaged in high-profile public criticism of several Russian regions that were seeking to provide financial support for teenage pregnancies rather than prevent them. At its core, however, the party is entirely apolitical. Its manifesto for the 2026 Duma election is titled "No Revolution. Evolution. Dignity" and makes no mention of the war against Ukraine; rather, the focus is on internet freedom and social reforms. In spring 2026, NP was the only Duma party to openly criticise the nationwide mobile internet blackouts; within just a few weeks, its poll ratings had doubled to 13 per cent. In April, the party even moved into second place, behind United Russia. Following Yabloko's exclusion from the September 2026 election, NP can expect a slight increase in votes — Nadezhdin's exclusion from the 2024 presidential election had such an effect.

The end of simulated pluralism

Now in its fifth year, the "special military operation" is pushing the simulated pluralism in the Russian State Duma to its limits. The full-scale war against Ukraine is generating massive pressure to conform. Meanwhile, the regime-controlled opposition parties are finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish themselves from the ruling United Russia party, which is as unpopular



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as it is omnipresent. None of the parties bound by Putin's war policy is in a position to address the growing discontent among the population. The exclusion of Yabloko from the September 2026 election means that the segment of the population critical of the war is once again deprived of the opportunity to express their views at the ballot box. And the same can be assumed for that segment of the population at the other end of the political spectrum — those for whom Putin's war strategy does not go far enough. The regime continues to have only one response to the growing domestic pressure; it is tightening its dictatorial grip on power so that it can carry on waging its war without compromise.

As regards voter turnout and the result for United Russia, the presidential administration has lowered its expectations since the start of the year from 55 per cent to 50 per cent and from 60 per cent to 45 per cent, respectively. In 2021, turnout for the election to the eighth State Duma stood at 51.7 per cent, according to official figures, while Golos put the actual turnout at no more than 38 per cent. Given the crisis-ridden mood in the country, it is likely that the people will be even less willing to go to the polls now. In a survey conducted in July 2026 by the commercial social and opinion research centre Russian Field, 27 per cent of respondents did not believe that any of the parties had satisfactory plans for the country's future. Another 31 per cent felt unable to answer the question at all. On the basis of these figures, it is already clear that the representativeness and legitimacy of the ninth State Duma will be close to zero.

The next Russian parliament will be in an even worse position than its predecessors to simulate pluralism. Having tailored the Duma elections and the party system to its own needs for the past 20 years, the Putin regime is now undermining itself at a time of full-scale war. The Kremlin will probably stick to holding elections to avoid openly transitioning to a dictatorship. The State Duma, however, can no longer fulfil

its function as a source of legitimacy for the Putin regime; the gap between the regime and the population has become too wide for that. For its part, the state is gradually shutting off all the valves through which discontent could be channelled. In doing so, it is depriving itself of the ability to gauge and assess social discontent. If domestic political tensions continue to rise, the system could well reach breaking point.

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