Russia's 2016 elections
More of the same?

SUMMARY

On 18 September, 2016 Russians will elect representatives at federal, regional and municipal level, including most importantly to the State Duma (lower house of parliament).

President Vladimir Putin remains popular, with over 80% of Russians approving of his presidency. However, the country is undergoing a prolonged economic recession and a growing number of Russians feel it is going in the wrong direction. Support for Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and ruling party United Russia has declined in recent months.

Nevertheless, United Russia is likely to hold onto, and even increase its parliamentary majority, given the lack of credible alternatives. Of the tame opposition parties currently represented in the State Duma, polls suggest the far-right Liberal Democrats will do well, overtaking the Communists to become the largest opposition party.

Outside the State Duma, opposition to Putin’s regime is led by liberal opposition parties Yabloko and PARNAS. Deeply unpopular and disunited, these parties have little chance of breaking through the 5% electoral threshold.

To avoid a repeat of the 2011–2012 post-election protests, authorities may try to prevent the blatant vote-rigging which triggered them. Nevertheless, favourable media coverage, United Russia’s deep pockets and changes to electoral legislation (for example, the re-introduction of single-member districts) will give the ruling party a strong head-start.

In this briefing:
- What elections will be held in Russia?
- Which parties will take part?
- Will elections be transparent and credible?
What elections will be held in Russia?
On 18 September 2016, Russians will elect:

- all 450 members of the lower and more influential house of parliament, the State Duma;
- 38 of the 85 regional parliaments;
- six of the 85 heads of regions (known variously as governors, presidents, and so forth); and
- municipal councillors, including in 11 regional capitals.

In the past, with both President and State Duma elected for a four-year term of office, parliamentary and presidential elections were held within a few months of each other. However, constitutional amendments in 2008 extended the President’s term of office to six years, and that of the State Duma to five years; therefore, the next presidential election will not be held until 2018.

Electoral system
Unlike the previous two State Duma elections, based on proportional representation, the 2016 elections will revert to the combined system used until 2003: half the members (225) will be elected from party lists by proportional representation, and the other half will be elected in single-member districts using a first-past-the-post system.

Candidates on party lists are only elected if their party secures 5% or more of the vote.

Most regional elections use a similar mix of majoritarian and proportional representation, while Moscow and St Petersburg have opted for a purely majoritarian system.

Russia’s system of managed democracy
Russia’s political system, which is based on the 1993 Constitution but has been fine-tuned since 1999 under Vladimir Putin’s rule, is designed to deliver reliable support for the regime while looking like a multi-party democracy. One of the main architects of this system of 'managed' or 'sovereign' democracy was Vladislav Surkov, former head of the presidential administration; Surkov has been described as the Kremlin’s 'puppet master' for his role in setting up and manipulating parties offering only token opposition to the regime.

Features of the system include:

- a party of power: United Russia, loyally supporting Putin;
- parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition parties: mostly docile, they create the impression of political pluralism, while rarely challenging United Russia’s grip on power, and that of Putin even less;
- a range of tools — electoral law, party financing rules, media controlled directly or indirectly by the state — which can be used to keep the opposition in line.

These features are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

A difficult context
The elections come at a difficult time, in the middle of Russia’s longest recession since the 1990s. In 2015, the economy shrunk by 3.7%, and growth is not expected to resume until 2017. Unemployment remains low, but rising prices have caused the first sustained decline in living standards since the beginning of Putin’s rule; one in every eight Russians now lives in poverty. Social discontent is expressed in a small but growing
number of protests: in 2015, there were 409 employment-related protests, including 168 strikes, 40% up on the previous year, and in December 2015, Russian truckers took to the streets to protest against new road taxes.

At the same time, the boost to Russian morale from the country's foreign policy adventures in Ukraine and Syria seems to be wearing off — in January 2016, the number who believe that Russia is moving in the right direction fell below 50% for the first time since the country annexed Crimea.

Which political parties will take part?
Under new rules introduced in 2014, parties are automatically eligible to participate if they received 3% of more of the vote in the 2011 State Duma elections, or if they hold at least one seat in a regional parliament. Under these rules, the four parties currently represented in the Duma plus a further ten smaller parties will participate.

Parties which do not fulfil the above conditions but which collect 200 000 signatures in at least 29 of Russia's 85 regions by August 2016 may also participate.

The main participating parties are as follows:

United Russia – the 'party of power' (UR)
United Russia was founded under the name of Unity in 1999, and renamed after a 2001 merger with the Fatherland-All Russia party. It was set up to mobilise support for Vladimir Putin, then serving as prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, and has continued to back him loyally ever since. In return, it has benefited from his popularity, holding a majority or near-majority in the State Duma since 2003 and in most of the regional parliaments, despite a large drop in its share of the vote in the 2011 elections.

In terms of ideology, the party advocates balanced policies designed to appeal to voters from both left and right, while remaining consistent with the government's general approach – economic liberalism (a 13% flat-rate income tax), combined with continuing state ownership of strategic sectors and strong social protection. It also supports increased military spending and an assertive foreign policy.

Although Putin enjoys United Russia's unreserved support, he has kept a certain distance from it: he has never been a member, despite leading it from 2008-2012, and in 2012 he resigned the leadership in favour of Dmitry Medvedev. By remaining above party politics, Putin is able to enjoy the support of voters from outside United Russia: in the 2012 presidential elections, 64% of Russians voted for him, whereas a few months earlier the party only gained 49% of votes, even with widespread alleged electoral
fraud. Since then, the gap between presidential and party approval ratings has widened even further, to over 40%.

**Primaries.** For the first time this year, United Russia held primaries in which ordinary voters – including non-members – were given a chance to select the party's candidates (the only other party to hold primaries was PARNAS). Critics, including the opposition Communists, have denounced these pre-elections as a stunt to make the party look more democratic than it really is, and accused party leadership of vote-rigging to ensure that favoured candidates are selected. Nevertheless, there have been some upsets, with around 50 current Duma members failing to be nominated; the most prominent of these is Alexei Pushkov, chair of the Duma’s Foreign Affairs Committee (on the other hand, donors to the party from the business world did well). As a result, there are likely to be many new faces representing United Russia in the State Duma.

**Electoral prospects.** Reflecting the difficult economic situation, party leader and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s approval rate has fallen from its peak of 71% in September 2014 to a near-record low of 54% in May 2016, with 45% disapproving of his activities. Support for the party has also declined, though to a lesser extent, and is still high. The most recent (22 May) survey by pollsters VCIOM shows support for UR at 46%, down from 50% in January; taking into account the 15% who do not intend to vote and the 7% who have not yet decided, this equates to 59% of declared voting intentions. Levada Center has consistently recorded lower levels of support for UR (39% in its most recent poll from January 2016). However, this discrepancy is largely due to a much higher number of respondents who have not yet decided how to vote or are not intending to vote; once these responses are taken into account, Levada's results are similar to those of VCIOM (65% of declared voting intentions for UR).

If these results are accurate, UR seems set to increase its majority substantially. In 2011, it scored 49% of the vote, giving it a 53% majority of State Duma seats. Barring a dramatic change of heart among voters, it will probably capture a larger share of votes this time; the re-introduction of single-member districts (see below) will give it a substantial additional boost.

**Parliamentary opposition**

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**Opinion polls: opposition parties**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>LDPR</th>
<th>Just Russia</th>
<th>Yabloko</th>
<th>PARNAS</th>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
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Source: VCIOM. March 2016.

**How well known/trusted are opposition politicians?**

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Known</th>
<th>Trusted</th>
<th>Distrusted</th>
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<tr>
<td>Zhimovskiy (LDPR)</td>
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<td>Zyuganov (KPRI)</td>
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<td>Yavlinsky (Yabloko)</td>
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<td>Mironov (Just Russia)</td>
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<td>Kasyanov (PARNAS)</td>
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<td>Navalny (Progress)</td>
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*Opinion polls suggest that, while critics of the regime (Yavlinsky, Kasyanov and Navalny) are well-known, they do not enjoy public trust. Liberal parties Yabloko and PARNAS are unlikely to break through the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation.*
The fact that United Russia looks set to increase its majority despite the economic slowdown and widespread pessimism has to do with the lack of a credible alternative among the opposition parties.

**Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) – the largest opposition party**

Founded in 1993, the KPRF is the self-declared successor of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, abolished by President Boris Yeltsin in 1991. Since its inception it has been led by Gennady Zyuganov, who had become well-known as a critic of President Mikhail Gorbachev. Support for Zyuganov peaked in the mid-1990s, when he came close to defeating Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential election, but has declined since then.

Nostalgia for Soviet-era communism remains widespread in Russia. Some 59% of respondents to a September 2013 poll felt that the positive aspects of life under communism outweighed the negative, particularly in the 60+ age group, but also in a significant minority of younger people. Nearly half (43%) would be in favour of a return to communism.

However, this nostalgia has not translated into broader support outside the party's traditional constituency (a disparate mix of older people living in small towns and villages; young people in Moscow and St Petersburg disaffected with UR rule; and Siberia, which is a regional stronghold). Zyuganov is an uncharismatic leader and the party's Marxist-Leninist ideology, which advocates a return to state ownership of large companies, among other things, looks irrelevant in modern Russia.

In the past, the KPRF rarely confronted the government on key issues, but over the past two years it has become more outspoken. While continuing to back the country's foreign policy, it has protested against various government proposals, such as raising the retirement age or compensating oligarchs affected by Western sanctions. It has called for stronger anti-corruption measures and criticised the creation of a new national guard answering directly to Putin as 'a dangerous path'. It routinely criticises Medvedev, opposing his appointment and arguing that under him the Duma has become a mere rubber-stamp assembly. The party also responded harshly to criticisms by Putin of Lenin's role in Russian history.

**Electoral prospects.** Despite the party's active recent opposition role and its left-wing anti-corruption rhetoric in the current economic downturn, it has failed to attract more voters. Just 9% of respondents to the latest polls intend to vote for it (equivalent to 12% of declared voting intentions). This is much less than the 19% the party scored in 2011, and means that it is likely to lose its long-held position as the country's largest opposition party.

**Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) – the maverick**

Founded in 1991, the LDPR is the oldest Russian party. Despite its name, it is neither democratic nor liberal — its colourful leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky has called for the reconstitution of the Russian empire and summary execution of criminals; recent proposals include nuclear strikes on an unspecified Atlantic island to demonstrate Russia's nuclear prowess, and on Turkey to punish it for downing a Russian warplane in November 2015.

On social matters, Zhirinovsky is in favour of free vodka for men and legalisation of polygamy; at the same time, he feels that Russians should save time and energy by only having sex four times a year. Provocative as such statements are, Zhirinovsky rarely challenges the authorities on essential matters. If anything, he benefits the Kremlin –
not only by keeping voters entertained, but also by splitting the opposition vote, making the government look moderate in comparison, and possibly also testing public reactions to radical opinions.

Electoral prospects. Like populists in many other parts of the world, Zhirinovsky is riding a wave of public support: he is the best-known opposition politician, as well as the most trusted (by 23% of respondents to a February 2016 survey – although a nearly equal number distrust him). While his LDPR is currently the smallest parliamentary party, recent polls give it 14% of declared voting intentions, suggesting it could overtake the Communists into second place.

A Just Russia (JR) – the regime’s ‘second leg’
In 2006, three smaller parties were merged to form Just Russia. Its purpose, openly stated by ‘puppet master’ Vladislav Surkov, was to act as the regime’s ‘second leg’, opposing United Russia while remaining loyal to Putin. In line with this, party leader Sergei Mironov, a close friend of Putin, even called for the president to be allowed to serve a third term.

Later, however, the party began to assert its independence. After scoring a record 14% in the 2011 parliamentary elections, JR joined post-election protests sparked by allegations of electoral fraud. Since then, the party has returned to the Kremlin fold, expelling anti-government protesters and, for example, backing the crackdown on foreign NGOs in Russia.

In terms of ideology, the party’s social-democratic agenda (for example, it wants higher taxes for the rich) was designed to attract moderate left-wing voters away from the Communists, but in 2011 most of its voters were disaffected United Russia supporters.

Electoral prospects. Opinion polls suggest that JR will lose votes, barely scraping past the 5% electoral threshold to remain in parliament (7.6% of declared voting intentions in May 2016).

Non-parliamentary opposition
In addition to the four parties in the State Duma, a further ten hold seats in one or more regional assemblies and are therefore entitled to take part in the elections. These include the left-wing Patriots of Russia, the pro-business Right Cause, and the far-right Rodina. Right Cause was described by its own ex-leader Mikhail Prorokhov as a ‘puppet Kremlin party’, while Rodina was denounced by journalist Anna Politkovskaya as a creation of ‘the Kremlin’s spin doctors ... to draw moderately nationalist voters away from the more extreme National Bolsheviks’.

However, this group also includes some genuine opposition parties:

Yabloko — one of Russia’s few liberal parties
Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko is the largest non-parliamentary party; although it missed the 5% electoral threshold for Duma representation in 2011, it has 11 deputies in three of the 85 regional assemblies (over half of them in the liberal stronghold of St Petersburg).

Yabloko’s liberal values contrast with those of the Kremlin and the parliamentary opposition. For example, it has denounced Russia’s annexation of Crimea as illegal, protested against Putin’s authoritarian rule, blamed the country’s foreign policy for Western sanctions, and some of its members have even campaigned for gay rights (although these are not a priority issue for the party). Together with PARNAS, it is an
associate member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, an alliance of centrist parties in European countries.

**People's Freedom Party (PARNAS) — a fierce critic of the Kremlin**  
PARNAS enjoys even less support than Yabloko. Its predecessor, the Republican Party of Russia, was dissolved in 2007 after a Supreme Court ruling, but in a rare victory for democracy that ruling was overturned by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012. Since its reconstitution it has taken part in several regional elections. In 2013 it won one seat in Yaroslav Oblast, thus becoming eligible to contest the 2016 State Duma elections. In the most recent (September 2015) round of regional elections, PARNAS candidates in two of the three regions contested by the party were disqualified by electoral officials on the grounds that the signatures their party had collected for registration were invalid; PARNAS failed to win any seats in the third region.

Since then, support for the party has dwindled even further. In April 2016, party leader Mikhail Kasyanov was caught on video in bed with his personal assistant. Not only does the video expose Kasyanov in an extramarital affair, it also records him badmouthing fellow opposition leaders such as Aleksei Navalny and Ilya Yashin, boasting about his family's wealth and promising to get his lover into parliament. The party's credibility has also been dented by the failure of the PARNAS-led 'Democratic Coalition' primaries held on 29 May: Kasyanov himself was one of the very few prominent opposition figures to stand, a mere 7,000 took part in the online vote, and the poll was finally cancelled after voters' personal data was leaked on the party's website, allegedly due to hackers.

**Progress Party — ally of PARNAS**  
Progress Party leader Aleksei Navalny is an outspoken critic of the Kremlin — in 2011 he famously described United Russia as a 'party of crooks and thieves'. In 2015 the Russian Ministry of Justice denied registration to the party on the grounds that it had submitted its application too late, and it therefore remains excluded from running directly in elections. However, as electoral legislation allows inclusion of non-members in party lists, Progress Party candidates have stood for PARNAS in regional elections, and are likely to do so again in the 2016 elections (Navalny himself is barred from taking part due to his 2013 conviction for embezzlement).

**Other opposition candidates**  
Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia movement has announced that it will back 24 candidates (19 for the State Duma and five for the St Petersburg legislative assembly). As Open Russia is not a registered political party and cannot present a party list, the candidates will stand in single-member districts.

**Electoral prospects.** According to polls, very few Russians intend to vote for liberal parties (1.2% of declared voting intentions for Yabloko, 0.3% for PARNAS), and although leaders such as Mikhail Kasyanov and Alexei Navalny are well-known, they are widely distrusted. Such suspicion reflects relentlessly negative media coverage (see below). In a context of rising nationalism, there is also resentment of pro-Western 'fifth columnists', voiced by Chechen leader and Putin ally Ramzan Kadyrov, among others.

Kadyrov's Instagram video showing Kasyanov in a sniper's crosshairs may be more than an empty threat. Fellow PARNAS leader Boris Nemtsov was assassinated by unknown assailants in February 2015, while in May 2015 Navalny and supporters were physically assaulted by men in Cossack uniforms at a provincial airport. Opposition figures are also being harassed through the courts: already convicted of embezzlement, Navalny now
faces libel charges; Yabloko candidate Dmitry Nekrasov has fled the country after being threatened with terrorism charges.

To have any chance of breaking through the 5% threshold for proportional representation in the State Duma, Yabloko and PARNAS would have to join forces. However, Russian electoral law makes this difficult by banning electoral blocs; therefore, in order to present a single list of candidates, the two parties would have to give up their separate identities and merge. Talks on a merger had already broken down in February 2016, and Kas'yanov's derogatory comments about fellow opposition leaders captured on video (see above) have made cooperation difficult.

Unpopular and fragmented, the liberal opposition can at best hope to win a handful of State Duma seats.

**Will elections be transparent and credible?**

In 2011, massive electoral fraud played a crucial part in securing a parliamentary majority for United Russia, boosting its votes by nearly one third according to one estimate. This time, the party will probably not need to resort to such tactics, thanks, among other things, to favourable media coverage, generous party financing and finely tuned electoral legislation.

**A clear media bias in favour of United Russia**

In Russia, the state controls the three main national TV channels, which are the main source of news for most Russians. Numerous other media outlets are owned by companies and individuals closely linked to the regime. Meanwhile, new legislation (including restrictions on foreign ownership; a requirement for bloggers with over 3,000 readers to register as media outlets; a raft of vaguely worded laws banning extremism, incitement of public disorder, defamation and so forth) has been used to rein in independent media. In 2016, Russia ranked 148th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index.

Reflecting this repressive atmosphere, media analyses show a clear bias in favour of the ruling party. In March 2016, United Russia was mentioned in the media up to five times more often than its parliamentary rivals and 15 times more frequently than the parties in the non-parliamentary opposition, with the gap widening in the run-up to elections. While PARNAS was mentioned more often than other small parties, it was also seven times more likely to be mentioned in a negative context than UR.1

Recent examples include extensive coverage of the Kas'yanov sex video (featured in a documentary by pro-Kremlin NTV) and of the failed PARNAS primaries (see above). A report on Rossiya, another state-owned channel, accused PARNAS ally Navalny of collaborating with the UK's Secret Intelligence Service, the MI6. Alleged corruption and attempted electoral irregularities on the part of PARNAS leader Kas'yanov, and Navalny's suspended sentence for embezzlement (politically motivated, according to him) are also favourite subjects of the state media. By contrast, the same media dismissed the much more serious questions raised by the Panama Papers scandal, which they claim is motivated by 'Putinophobia'.

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1 Early elections: saving money or silencing debate?

Originally scheduled for December 2016, elections have been brought forward to September – supposedly in order to save money by holding national elections simultaneously with regional ones. However, Communist Party leader Zyuganov claims the real reason is that voters are unlikely to pay much attention to the election campaign during the holiday season, thus making it more difficult for opposition parties to get their arguments across.
United Russia candidates can easily outspend rivals
Party financing is another area in which the ruling party has a head-start. In Russia, political parties derive most of their revenue from state subsidies (paid to parties having received 3% of more of the vote in previous elections) and donations. Both sources increase with a party's size. For example, in 2014 United Russia raised 3.4 billion roubles (around €70 million at the time) – twice as much as the LDPR, four times as much as the Communists and 600 times as much as PARNAS. In the 2011 campaign, United Russia spent more than all the opposition parties combined.

Changes to electoral rules
UR commands an absolute majority in both houses of the federal parliament, and in all but four of the 85 regional parliaments. Its representatives also hold majorities in national and regional electoral commissions. The authorities have therefore been able to ensure that electoral legislation and its implementation favour United Russia.

Single-member districts strongly favour UR as the largest party
The change which probably favours UR the most is the 2014 re-introduction of single-mandate districts. As by far the largest party, UR is assured of winning an even bigger share of seats from majoritarian representation (first past the post) than from purely proportional representation.

Moreover, single-majority districts allow pro-Putin candidates from outside United Russia to run as independents, tapping into the President's popularity among the many voters who are alienated from the ruling party. Some of these candidates could be backed by the All-Russia People’s Front, a pro-Putin movement established in 2011 and separate from United Russia (though sharing many of its members). United Russia's poor performance in the 2011 elections prompted speculation at one point that the Front could replace it as an electoral vehicle for Putin. For the time being, the Front is not planning to register itself as a political party. However, it has the resources to support pro-Kremlin candidates in districts which might otherwise be lost to UR.

New electoral districts to minimise influence of urban support for the opposition
Electoral boundaries for the 225 single-member district have been carefully redrawn to minimise opposition parties' chances of winning seats. For example, urban areas (where the opposition vote is concentrated) have been split between several districts with a predominance of rural voters, more likely to support United Russia.

Restrictive electoral rules exclude many smaller parties
Party registration. Some of the restrictions on party registration adopted between 2000 and 2011 (for example, a minimum of 40 000 members) have now been relaxed – in 2012 required membership was cut to just 500. As a result, the number of registered political parties has risen to 74 (however, Alexei Navalny’s Progress Party is still excluded, allegedly due to late submission of its paperwork).

Participation in State Duma elections – party lists. The number of parties automatically eligible to contest the 225 seats elected by proportional representation has risen to 14, compared to just four in the 2011 elections. Other parties have to collect 200 000 signatures in at least 29 of Russia's 85 regions by August 2016; it is unlikely that many will succeed in doing so.

The fact that more parties will be allowed to contest elections – at least 14 this time, compared to seven in 2011 (four automatically eligible parties, plus three on the basis of signatures) – might seem like a positive development. On the other hand, this change
could benefit United Russia. Some of the smaller parties can be considered 'spoilers' – not large enough to break through the 5% electoral threshold, but potentially splitting the opposition vote. Examples include Patriots of Russia and the Communists of Russia, two parties which share a left-wing agenda and, in the latter case, a confusingly similar name, with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

**Participation in State Duma elections – single-member districts.** Candidates in single-member districts can stand as independents without having to belong to eligible parties. However, registration is now much more difficult than in 2003, the last time Duma deputies were elected from single-member districts: candidates now have to get signatures from 3% of eligible voters (in 2003: 1%), to be collected in June and July (when many voters are away on holiday); independent candidates and those from smaller parties will struggle to meet these new requirements. Even candidates who succeed in collecting the required number of signatures are not sure of being able to stand. In the 2015 regional elections, the authorities excluded PARNAS from standing in two of the four regions which it had planned to contest, while in a third the party itself withdrew after discovering that pro-Kremlin infiltrators were collecting forged signatures to invalidate its bid. For the 2016 elections, the maximum allowed percentage of non-compliant signatures in single-member districts has been reduced from 25% (in 2003) to 5%, making it all the easier for the authorities to exclude unwelcome candidates on the basis of technicalities.

**Participation in elections for regional parliaments and governors.** Regional elections are similarly biased in favour of the ruling party. For example, candidates in gubernatorial elections need to collect the signatures of 10% of a region's municipal councillors. The latter are of course dependent on administrations headed by incumbent candidates, thereby giving those candidates a head start. Such arrangements mainly benefit UR, which is fielding five of the six incumbent governors up for re-election this year.

**Clampdown on election observers makes effective monitoring impossible**

It is not yet known whether international observers, for example from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), will take part. Neither the European Parliament nor the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly are likely to send observers.

The only independent domestic election watchdog, Golos, has faced systematic harassment, presumably due to its part in exposing electoral fraud in the 2011 elections. In a surprise move, in July 2015 the authorities removed the organisation from the list of NGOs stigmatised as foreign agents. However, the capacity of Golos activists and other observers to uncover electoral fraud will be largely neutralised by new legislation, requiring election observers to obtain accreditation at least three days in advance, valid for only one polling station. They will therefore be unable to carry out mobile checks, and authorities will know in advance which stations are under observation.

**European Parliament's view.** In a resolution adopted in December 2011, the EP noted that the 2011 State Duma elections did not meet OSCE election standards due to 'fraud and ... procedural violations, lack of media impartiality, harassment of independent monitors and lack of separation between party and state', and called for ‘new free and fair elections to be held after registration of all opposition parties’, several of which had been unfairly excluded.
Electoral fraud will continue, though probably on a smaller scale than in 2011
Recent Russian polls have been marred by continuing fraud. For example, Golos received 113 notifications of electoral fraud in municipal elections held during the first five months of 2016.

However, there have been some encouraging developments on this front. Election Commission head Vladimir Churov, nicknamed 'The Wizard' for his part in conjuring up a United Russia victory in the 2011 elections, was recently replaced by Human Rights Ombudsman Ella Pamfilova, known for her more independent stance. One of Pamfilova's first acts in her new role was to annul municipal elections held in April 2016 in the village of Barvikha near Moscow after complaints of fraud, including by candidates associated with Alexei Navalny. It is true that her capacity to stamp out fraud by September 2016 will be limited, given the scale of the problem. Nevertheless, her appointment suggests that the authorities would like to give the elections at least an appearance of legitimacy, not least in order to prevent a repeat of the unprecedented post-election mass protests triggered by accusations of vote-rigging in 2011. In any case, with the electoral balance already heavily tilted in favour of United Russia, electoral fraud on the day of the elections is unlikely to be needed.

Tougher laws to prevent public unrest during the electoral period
Since 2011, the Kremlin has tightened its grip on Russian media and civil society, making protests on the scale seen after the last elections unlikely. Even so, the authorities are not taking any chances: new laws adopted in 2012 and 2014 (following the Maidan protests in Kyiv) have introduced tougher penalties for participants in unauthorised rallies. In addition, a new National Guard was set up in April 2016 to 'fight terrorism' and may eventually comprise as many as 400,000 troops; equipment ordered for the new body includes water cannon and flamethrowers, which, according to the Yabloko opposition party, could be used to clamp down on protests.

Endnotes
1 Data from Golos, presented at a Round Table on the 2016 Duma elections held in the European Parliament in April 2016.

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