Russia's 2018 presidential election
Six more years of Putin

SUMMARY
On 18 March 2018, Russians will elect the president who will govern their country for the next six years. Incumbent, Vladimir Putin is firmly on track to win, with approval ratings that have stayed above 80% since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russians see him as a strong president, who has brought order to the country and restored its great power status. They are worried about the economy, poverty and corruption, but these problems, though partly blamed on Putin, have barely dented his popularity.

Reportedly, Putin’s campaign has set a twin target of a 70% vote in his favour and a 70% turnout. Polls suggest that Putin will indeed win by a record margin, but also that a low turnout will tarnish his victory, denying him a ringing endorsement at the start of his fourth and probably final term in office. Apathy will probably be the main reason for voters staying at home, but some will heed an election boycott called by Alexey Navalny, Putin’s most vocal opponent, who has been barred from the race.

Vying for second place are seven other candidates. The most likely runners-up are veteran Vladimir Zhirinovsky and newcomer Pavel Grudinin. Reality TV star Xenia Sobchak adds colour to an otherwise lacklustre campaign, but few see her as a credible candidate.

Widespread electoral fraud on the day of the vote is not expected. Nevertheless, the exclusion of Alexey Navalny and the lack of any real alternative to Putin raise questions about the democratic legitimacy of the election.

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Russian electoral law

According to the Russian Constitution, the president is elected for six years (before 2008: for four years). A president cannot serve more than two consecutive terms, must be a Russian citizen and must have resided permanently in the country for at least ten years.

More detailed conditions for the election are set out in Federal Law No 19 on the Election of the President of the Russian Federation, adopted in January 2003 and most recently amended in December 2017:

**Date**: the election is normally held on the second Sunday of the month that comes six years after the previous election. However, according to a 2017 amendment, it is postponed by a week if that Sunday falls in a week including a public holiday. This last condition is significant, as it has enabled the 2018 election to be moved from 11 March to 18 March, the anniversary of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea – thus reminding voters of what many see as one of Vladimir Putin’s greatest achievements.

**Candidates' requirements**: candidates may not have a non-expunged criminal record. Candidates nominated by a party that has at least one seat in the State Duma (lower house of the Federal Parliament) do not need to collect signatures in support of their candidacy; up until and including 2012, all other candidates were required to collect 2 million signatures. The latter requirement has since been eased: independent candidates now need 300,000 signatures; those nominated by a registered political party, of which there are currently 64, only need 100,000.

**Second round**: if no candidate wins more than half the votes cast, a second round, between the two frontrunners, is held three weeks later. However, only once (in 1996) was a second round needed, when Boris Yeltsin narrowly defeated Gennady Zyuganov.

Context of the election

Surveys by the independent pollster, Levada Centre, suggest that a growing number of Russians (72% in 2018, up from just 31% 19 years earlier) feel that their country has become a global leader. Though many are worried about tensions with the West, the vast majority (in May 2017, 70%) want to see Russia continue its assertive foreign policy. However, they are gloomier about the domestic situation; although the recession ended in late 2016, growth in 2017 was an anemic 1.7% – well below the 6-7% of Putin’s first two presidencies. Despite growth, in 2017 household income declined for the fourth year in a row. Some 20 million Russians now live below the official poverty line – 4 million more than in 2013. Mass protests in early 2017 showed that many resent the wealth of the elite and its rampant corruption. In spite of all this, a majority (56% in November 2017) feel that the country is going in the right direction, up from 45% in early 2016.

The polls

Polls (see Figure 1) suggest that, once again, none of the other candidates will even come close to challenging Putin. More in doubt is the likely turnout. With a Putin victory all but guaranteed, many voters are likely to stay at home, thus repeating the results of the 2016 parliamentary election, in which a record low turnout of 47% spoiled an otherwise overwhelming victory for Putin’s United Russia party.

According to Levada Centre polls carried out in November and December 2017, 58% of respondents were either certain or likely to vote, whereas in August 2017 the figure was 57%. Comparing the results of similar polls for previous elections with actual turnout,
Levada Centre predicts that turnout in March 2018 will be 4-6% lower than what polls suggest, giving a likely figure of just over 50%.

By contrast, a February 2018 poll by Levada competitor, FOM, claims that 84% of voters are certain (61%) or likely (23%) to take part in the election. However, Levada's figures are more credible, as they fit better with previous trends – the post-Soviet record was 69% in 1996, and turnout has been on a declining trend since then. Moreover, FOM gets part of its revenue from government contracts, making it vulnerable to political pressure.

The candidates

There are eight officially registered candidates – more than in 2012 (five candidates), due to the smaller number of signatures needed for registration.

Vladimir Putin: Incumbent president, on track for a fourth term in office

*Russian public opinion on Vladimir Putin*

Surveys (see Figure 2) show that Russians see Putin as a strong leader who has brought order to the country, restored its great power status and successfully defended the country from external threats. This appreciation is reflected in Putin's high approval rating, which in 18 years has never fallen below 60%, rising since 'reunification' with illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014 to record-high levels, in excess of 80%.

On the other hand, Russians are disappointed by Putin's failure to tackle problems such as poverty and corruption. Some 51% do not expect their lives to change for the better under his rule. Many are cynical about Putin's motives; 42% are at least partially convinced that he has abused his power, and 41% believe that he serves the interests of the military and security forces, compared to just 17% for those of 'ordinary people'.

However, mitigating such criticism is a tendency for public opinion to shift some of the blame to the government, while crediting successes to Putin in person. In a December 2017 survey, Putin and the government are blamed in roughly equal measure for the rising cost of living, whereas 61% attribute 'Russia's economic successes' to Putin, 21% to the government, and just 12% to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Only 31% believe that Putin is fully briefed on the situation in the country; 42% feel that he gets distorted and incomplete information; and 16% accuse the president's entourage of hiding the country's problems from him. Such opinions, which fit in with the historical Russian perception that 'the Tsar is good, the boyars (nobles) are bad', help to explain why the country's economic and other problems have not dented Putin's approval ratings.
Putin's popularity puts him on track not only to win a fourth presidential term, but also to win by a bigger margin than ever before. Polls show that, among voters who have already made their minds up, a stable percentage of over 80% intend to vote for him.

What is Putin doing to achieve the highest possible vote and turnout?

Reportedly, Putin's campaign has set a twin target of 70% of the vote with a 70% turnout. As explained above, polls suggest that Putin is indeed on track to capture a record share of the vote, but a high turnout is much more doubtful. Therefore, in order to have any chance of achieving both targets, Putin cannot simply rely on his high approval ratings.

Unlike 2012, when Putin stood as a United Russia candidate, this time he is running as an independent (he did the same in 2000 and 2004). Despite its strong performance in 2016, United Russia has always been much less popular than Putin (in a December 2017 poll, just 37% of respondents said they would vote for it); distancing himself from the party allows him to appeal to a much broader electorate.

Resisting comparisons with the stagnation and gerontocracy of the late Brezhnev period, Putin has also attempted to broaden his regime's appeal by reshuffling the regional leadership, bringing in 11 (out of 85) mostly more youthful regional governors in September 2017.

The need to convey good news ahead of the election may well have been behind Putin's December 2017 declaration of complete victory in Syria (even though Russian military operations have continued since then).

Mindful of the need to be seen to do something about the problems which affect the daily lives of Russian voters, in June 2017 Putin pledged to tackle poverty. That pledge was followed by announcements of improved child benefits for low-income families, a higher minimum wage and a tax amnesty targeted at self-employed business people, pensioners, the disabled and war veterans, potentially benefiting over 20 million voters.

Recent months have seen a series of high-profile corruption trials, such as that of former Economy Minister Alexei Ulyukayev (sentenced to eight years in prison in December 2017). Although such trials do little to address the root causes of corruption, they create the impression that the government is finally getting to grips with the problem.

Puti's priority for his next term of office: Revitalising the economy

Putin has done little active campaigning, and declines to take part in televised debates between presidential candidates. However, some priorities were outlined in his State of the Nation address of 1 March 2018. Apart from extensively presenting the country's new generation of supposedly invincible hypersonic nuclear missiles, the speech sets out ambitious targets to stop Russia from falling further behind – something which Putin sees as the main threat to the country. These include: a 50% increase in GDP by 2025; doubling expenditure on roads and healthcare; halving the poverty rate; high-speed internet throughout the country; and reducing the share of the economy controlled by the state.
Of course Putin, just like Medvedev before him, has been talking about economic reforms for years, but to little effect. Based on the track record of the last six years, the prospects of achieving any of these targets look doubtful. At current growth rates, the economy will have only grown by 15% in 2025; the federal budget makes no provision for major increases in healthcare or infrastructure spending; state ownership of the economy (currently estimated at 70%) continues to expand.

The succession issue
The next six years are also likely to be dominated by the question of what happens when Putin finally steps down. No indication has yet been given as to the likely successor, though based on public opinion, Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, would be frontrunner; in October 2017, he was Russia's second most popular politician, chosen by 30% of Russians, followed by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (27%) and Dmitry Medvedev (11%). Putin's choice of prime minister for his next presidency, if he decides to replace Medvedev, might give some idea of who he would like to take over.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Pavel Grudinin, Grigor Yavlinsky: 'System' opposition candidates
In Russia, 'system' parties are those officially tolerated as part of the country's system of managed democracy. Parties that have at least one seat in the State Duma are in a privileged position, as they do not have to collect signatures in order to register a candidate. Nevertheless, three of those parties (Fair Russia, Civic Platform and Rodina) have decided not to nominate anyone, instead throwing their support behind Putin.

Representing the Liberal Democratic Party is maverick Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Neither liberal nor democratic, for his sixth attempt at the Russian presidency he is promising to restore the Soviet Union's 1985 borders and make himself the country's 'supreme ruler'. Since the beginning of 2016, Zhirinovsky has slipped from 12% to 7.4% of voting intentions, and from second to third place.

Communist Gennady Zyuganov is another long-term fixture on the Russian political stage. In 1996, he came close to unseating Boris Yeltsin after getting 32% of the first-round votes, but by December 2017 his popularity had fallen to under 5% of voting intentions. In an effort to restore some of its appeal, the Communist Party decided in January 2018 to nominate a new and younger candidate, Pavel Grudinin. Although Grudinin's situation as a millionaire strawberry farmer sits uneasily with the party's ideology, that effort seems to have paid off; in February 2018, he overtook Zhirinovsky into second place, with 7.8% of voting intentions according to a February 2018 poll.

On the fringes of the system is Grigory Yavlinsky, leader of the liberal opposition party, Yabloko, and another veteran of Russian politics. He came third in the 2000 election, but since then his popularity and that of his party (no longer represented in the Federal Parliament since 2007) have declined; polls give him around 0.7% of voting intentions.

Alexey Navalny: Not a candidate, but still a challenge for Putin
More of a threat to Putin is the 'non-system' opposition, in particular Alexey Navalny, his most vocal and determined critic. In 2013, Navalny was given a suspended sentence for embezzlement, widely seen as politically motivated by the need to silence him. In February 2016, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg ruled that the 2013 trial had been 'arbitrary and unfair'. However, a February 2017 re-trial in Russia upheld the original verdict, handing down a five-year suspended sentence; on that basis, he was barred from registering as a candidate in December 2017.
Navalny’s Progress Party has also been denied registration; his Fifth Season Foundation, which finances his political activities, was ordered to close in January 2018, and his offices have been raided by police. Supporters face arrest and intimidation. In April 2017, Navalny himself nearly lost one eye after an attack with antiseptic; accused in February 2018 of organising illegal rallies, he may have to spend the election period behind bars.

On the face of it, Putin has nothing to fear from Navalny, who scored just 2% in a November 2017 Levada Centre opinion poll. However, thanks to adept use of social media and a strong network comprising over 60 regional offices across the country and 200 000 enthusiastic supporters, Navalny has proved remarkably effective in tapping into discontent and mobilising protests. In 2011, 30% of Russians agreed with his description of Putin's United Russia as a 'party of crooks and thieves', rising to 51% two years later. In the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, the one recent election in which he has been allowed to stand, opinion polls initially suggested that he would win just 3% of the vote; he went on to capture nearly ten times that figure (27%). A March 2017 video exposing Dmitry Medvedev's alleged corrupt accumulation of wealth garnered 26 million views (as of February 2018) and triggered huge protests.

Navalny's political platform

Navalny has had links to Russia's far right; before 2011 he participated in marches, and although he has toned down the nationalist rhetoric since then, his political programme still includes curbs on immigration from Central Asia. Pro-Kremlin propaganda has used those links in an attempt to frame him as a fascist. However, the focus of Navalny's activity is denunciation of the ruling elite and its corrupt practices. Apart from that, his manifesto promises higher minimum wages, more spending on health and education and less on defence, and less red tape for businesses. He is also in favour of a new referendum to clarify Crimea's status and legalisation of gay marriage in some parts of the country.

The Kremlin's dilemma – to bar or not to bar?

If Navalny were allowed to stand in a national election, it is unlikely that he could replicate the success of his 2013 Moscow campaign, given that he has much less support in the rest of the country than in the capital. Nevertheless, he could well do much better than his current standing in opinion polls would suggest – perhaps even well enough to beat some of the 'system' candidates. The mere fact of being accepted as an official candidate would entitle Navalny to free air time on state media, and force Putin (who currently refuses to even mention his name) to acknowledge him as an opponent.

In the end, a decision was taken to bar Navalny. However, that decision also carries risks. It undermines claims that the election gives voters a genuine choice. Navalny has called for a boycott of what he describes as a 'pseudo-election'. In Moscow, over a thousand protestors took to the streets on 28 January 2018 in support of the boycott – much fewer than in the anti-corruption rallies of the previous year; nevertheless, Navalny will be in a good position to claim a low turnout on 18 March (which is likely anyway, even without the boycott) as a success for his campaign.

Xenia Sobchak – a spoiler candidate?

Xenia Sobchak is famous in Russia as a reality TV host, journalist and socialite. Her father Anatoly was a political mentor of Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, since 2011 she has worked as a presenter for the pro-opposition TV channel Dozhd, and in 2012 she took part in protests over alleged vote-rigging in the previous year's parliamentary elections. Sobchak has criticised Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and in January 2018 she travelled to Chechnya to denounce human rights abuses there. While admitting that she has no
political experience or any chance of winning against Putin, she has called for discontented Russians not represented by any of the other candidates to choose her.

Despite Sobchak's opposition credentials, critics argue that her candidacy plays into the Kremlin's hands by dividing the opposition and making the election look more competitive than it actually is. Navalny is among those critics, describing her as a 'caricature liberal candidate', even though she had promised to step aside if he were allowed to run. Resented by pro-Putin and pro-opposition voters alike, Sobchak received the top disapproval rating in a January 2018 poll: 390 % of respondents declared their firm intention not to vote for her, compared to 45 % each for Yavlinsky and Zhirinovsky.

Other candidates
The remaining candidates are: Sergey Barburin (0.4 % of the vote), a conservative politician of the 1990s, representing the right-wing All-Russian People's Union; Boris Titov, business ombudsman, of the Party of Growth(Titov is an economic liberal who has played a prominent part in the debate on the future direction of economic reforms, but is only forecast to score 0.2 % of the vote); and Maxim Suraikin (0.2 %) of the Communists of Russia party, which the larger, but similarly named, Communist Party accuses of being a Kremlin-engineered 'spoiler' party, designed to split the communist vote.

Will elections be transparent and credible?
The legal framework for presidential elections has improved since 2012
In a December 2017 preliminary report, the OSCE notes several improvements, many of them made in response to its recommendations following the previous election: not only do these make it easier to run as an independent candidate by reducing the number of signatures that have to be collected, but they also require video cameras to record voting and counting, and they increase fines for electoral violations. A further improvement is that observers can now only be removed by a court decision.

Electoral fraud likely to be limited
Since 2016, Russia's Central Election Commission has been chaired by former Human Rights Ombudsman Ella Pamfilova – an improvement over her predecessor Vladimir Churov, nicknamed 'The Wizard' for his part in conjuring up a United Russia victory in the 2011 elections. Under Pamfilova, the 2016 parliamentary vote was much cleaner; despite some concerns, international OSCE observers noted that the election had been 'transparently administered'.

As of 27 February 2018, election monitor Golos had recorded 570 violations of electoral law relating to the current election, typically involving the authorities' use of administrative resources to favour the Putin campaign. Although that number will inevitably rise as the campaign progresses, it is still low compared to the 7 800 complaints recorded by Golos during the 2011 parliamentary election. As in 2016, there is little incentive for electoral fraud, so long as Putin enjoys an unassailable lead in opinion polls.

Not a level playing field for candidates
An adequate legal framework and a more or less clean vote are not nearly enough to ensure a level playing field. Alexey Navalny's exclusion shows the extent to which the Kremlin controls all branches of government, including the courts, and how it uses its
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power to prevent any serious challenge to Putin's regime. Electoral law allows all candidates equal access to free air time on state media, but that does little to redress the pro-Putin bias in those same media outside party political broadcasts; election monitor Golos has calculated that in February 2018, 62% of reporting on Putin by federal TV channels was positive, compared to 75% and 18% negative coverage for Grudinin and Sobchak respectively; other candidates received mostly neutral coverage.

Putin is undoubtedly popular in Russia, and a renewal of his presidency reflects the wishes of a majority of Russians. Nevertheless, it can hardly be said that voters have a genuine choice between candidates competing on a level playing field. As Navalny commented in January 2018, 'this procedure, which they call an election, in fact is only held to re-appoint Putin', described by him as 'emperor for life'.

### European Parliament response

Many of the criticisms made by the European Parliament's March 2012 resolution on the outcome of the 2012 presidential election are still relevant: electoral irregularities, media bias in favour of Vladimir Putin, and the lack of a united and credible opposition.

In its April 2017 resolution on the arrest of Alexei Navalny following mass anti-corruption protests, the Parliament condemns Navalny's embezzlement conviction as an effort 'to silence yet another independent political voice'. By excluding Navalny from the political arena, the conviction 'further constrains political pluralism in Russia and raises serious questions as to the fairness of democratic processes'. Echoing these words, a December 2017 statement by the European External Action Service argues that Navalny's case 'casts a serious doubt on the prospect of democratic elections'.

As in previous elections, the OSCE will lead an observation mission. However, the European Parliament has not been invited by Russia's Central Election Commission to take part.

### Endnotes

1 Levada Centre, which is Russia's only major independent pollster, decided in January 2018 to stop publishing opinion polls on the election after being designated a 'foreign agent' by the government. Therefore, unless otherwise indicated, the polls cited in this briefing are from Public Opinion Foundation (FOM). FOM's results on the distribution of votes between candidates are roughly consistent with Levada's, but predict a much higher turnout.

2 All the polls cited in the section on Vladimir Putin are from the Levada Centre.

3 By the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM), which is government-owned.

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