

## Russia: political parties in a 'managed democracy'

From the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution until 1989, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the country's only legal party. Since then, the number has grown, with a record 69 parties participating in the September 2014 regional elections. However, this apparent diversity does not mean that Russian voters have a real choice, as Vladimir Putin's grip on power is increasingly unchallenged, gradually reversing the gains made in the post-1989 democratisation process.

### United Russia – the 'party of power' (UR)

In an inversion of the usual democratic procedure whereby political parties choose their leaders, the party was set up in 1999 to mobilise support for Vladimir Putin, at the time serving as prime minister under Boris Yeltsin. (Initially it went by the name of Unity, but was renamed United Russia after a merger in 2001). Thanks to the [popularity of Putin's strong action on Chechnya](#), UR quickly became the dominant party in both national and most regional parliaments. It has held onto its [majority](#) in the lower house of the national parliament (State Duma) ever since 2003, despite a large drop in its share of the vote in 2011 (from 64% to 49%). [Regional elections](#) held in September 2014, in which UR-nominated candidates won in 28 out of 30 provinces, suggest that UR's grip on power is likely to remain as firm as ever for the foreseeable future.

**Ideology:** in its [manifestos](#), UR advocates centrist policies which will appeal to the largest possible number of voters while remaining consistent with the government's general approach – economic liberalism but with state regulation and social protection, alongside an emphasis on conservative values and patriotism.

### 'System' opposition parties

None of the three opposition parties currently holding seats in the Duma represents a serious threat to UR's dominance.

#### *Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) – stuck in a time warp*

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was abolished by Yeltsin following the attempted coup of 1991. Two years later, the KPRF was founded as its self-declared successor, and has been led since then by Gennady Zyuganov, who had become well-known as a critic of Gorbachev.

The KPRF is the country's largest opposition party (20% of seats in the Russian Parliament). However, since 1996, when Zyuganov came close to defeating Yeltsin in the presidential election, support has declined, and it [no longer represents a serious challenge to the Kremlin](#). In the September 2014 regional elections only one of the 30 elected governors was a Communist. The fact that Communist and Communist-supported candidates often defect to UR after winning (in [Irkutsk](#), for example) reflects the party's lack of influence.

While many of the party's supporters are elderly people nostalgic for the Soviet Union, living in [small towns and villages](#), the party's status as the largest opposition party attracts younger people in large cities, including university students disenchanted with Putin's rule. [Siberia](#) is also a Communist stronghold.

**Ideology:** the KPRF remains attached to Marxist-Leninist dogma and advocates State ownership of the economy. However, it agrees with UR on many other issues – for example, it supported Putin's [ban on 'gay propaganda'](#) to minors, and it has [called for diplomatic recognition](#) of separatist regions in eastern Ukraine.

#### *Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDRP) – the maverick*

In 1991 the LDRP ended the Communist Party's monopoly by becoming the first of the new parties to be legally registered. Its credentials as a genuine opposition party have been questioned – ex-Politburo member [Alexander Yakovlev](#) claimed the party was instigated by the KGB, and whether or not this is true, the Kremlin has benefited from LDRP splitting the opposition vote (it currently holds 12% of seats in Parliament) while rarely voting against the government. With his extreme right-wing chauvinistic views, colourful party leader

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is seen as a ['showman'](#) who diverts support from the more staid KPRF without offering a credible alternative to Putin.

**Ideology:** neither liberal nor democratic, the party has variously called for the reconstitution of the Russian empire and summary execution of criminals, alongside proposals such as [free vodka for men](#) and [legalisation of polygamy](#).

*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 Putin deputy and ['puppet master'](#) Vladislav Surkov, was to act as the regime's ['second leg'](#), opposing United Russia while remaining loyal to Putin (who is not officially a UR member). 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 in post-election protests sparked by allegations of electoral fraud. Since then, the party has returned to the Kremlin fold, [expelling anti-government protestors](#) and, for example, calling for a [crackdown on foreign NGOs](#) in Russia.

**Ideology:** the party's social democratic agenda was designed to attract moderate left-wing voters away from the Communists, but in 2011 most of its voters were disaffected United Russia supporters.

### Smaller parties

While not gaining enough votes to clear the 5% hurdle for the national parliament, several smaller parties are represented at regional level, including: [Yabloko](#), a liberal party which is highly critical of the Kremlin. In contrast, [A Just Cause](#) is, like JR, a Kremlin-sponsored project, campaigning on a pro-business platform. The [Progress Party](#) is one of the many 'non-system' opposition parties denied registration by the authorities. Its leader, prominent blogger [Alexei Navalny](#) who famously described United Russia as 'a party of crooks and thieves', achieved a [surprisingly high score](#) in the 2013 elections for mayor of Moscow.

### Why multiparty democracy is not working in Russia

The unequal relationship between political parties and the executive is a [direct consequence](#) of the 1993 [constitution](#), adopted after a showdown in which president Yeltsin defeated his parliamentary opponents. Under the constitution, the president has [wide-ranging powers](#), for example to appoint the prime minister and dissolve parliament, whereas the parliament needs a two-thirds majority in both houses, validated by the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, to impeach him – almost impossible to achieve in practice.

Secondary legislation on electoral registration requiring parties to have at least 50 000 members with a minimum of 500 each in at least half of Russian regions effectively excluded all but a handful of parties. While most of these restrictions were removed in 2012 following a [European Court of Human Rights ruling](#), the authorities can still easily bar particularly outspoken opponents (such as the Progress Party) on the basis of technicalities such as [documentation errors](#).

While United Russia's electoral performance undoubtedly reflects approval of Putin's policies (for example the Levada Centre, an independent pollster, measured his [approval rating at 85%](#) in November 2014), few would argue that Russian elections are [free and fair](#). Media coverage is biased in favour of United Russia – in the [2013 Moscow mayoral election](#) opposition candidate Aleksei Navalny got only a quarter as many TV mentions as his UR rival, mostly in the context of corruption charges against him. There have also been [numerous allegations of electoral fraud](#) in favour of UR – particularly during the 2011 parliamentary election. Meanwhile, restrictive new legislation on foreign NGOs is being used to limit the activities of independent election pollsters (such as the [Levada Centre](#)) and watchdogs with alleged foreign links.

In Russia's managed democracy, the executive creates and manipulates parties, excluding as far as possible those which it cannot control. The function of Russian political parties is apparently to legitimise the system by providing the appearance of democracy without challenging the Kremlin's exercise of power.

The EP's numerous resolutions on Russian internal affairs include the [Resolution on the rule of law in Russia](#) (13 June 2013), which 'calls on the Russian authorities to guarantee political pluralism', and the [Resolution on the outcome of the presidential elections in Russia](#) (15 March 2012), which 'strongly criticises ... [electoral] irregularities ... and the fact that voters' choice was limited; stresses ...[the lack of] balanced [broadcast media] coverage' and calls on opposition groups to offer Russian citizens a 'credible alternative'.