Russia's 2021 elections
Another step on the road to authoritarian rule

SUMMARY
On 17-19 September, Russia will hold elections at local, regional and national level, most importantly to the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly. Four hundred and fifty deputies will be elected for a five-year term.

Ever since 2003, the State Duma has been dominated by the pro-Putin United Russia party, which currently holds a three-quarters supermajority. With the ruling party clearly in charge, the parliament serves as little more than a rubber stamp for Kremlin and government initiatives. In Russia’s system of managed democracy, the main role of the parliamentary opposition is to preserve an appearance of political pluralism, while carefully excluding most regime critics.

Following the June 2020 constitutional referendum, which opened the door to President Vladimir Putin potentially staying on until 2036, the authorities moved to eliminate the few remaining pockets of resistance. Opposition activist Alexey Navalny is now in jail, and many other regime opponents are either facing criminal charges or have left the country.

Even though United Russia faces no real electoral competition, it may struggle to repeat its 2016 performance. Voters are alienated by the party’s reputation for corruption and the generally unpromising context of political and economic stagnation. Opinion polls suggest that its majority will be reduced, possibly below the two-thirds threshold needed to adopt constitutional changes; nevertheless, the party is virtually guaranteed to win. Many observers see the elections, and the wave of repression preceding them, as the latest stage in Russia’s transition from flawed democracy to fully fledged authoritarian state.

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Which elections will take place in Russia?

**Elections** will be held in Russia over three days, from 17 to 19 September 2021. Voters will simultaneously elect regional parliaments in 39 out of Russia’s 85 regions, governors in nine regions (three more governors will be indirectly elected by regional parliaments), and local councils in hundreds of towns and cities. However, the main event will be the election of 450 deputies for a five-year term in the State Duma, the lower and more influential house of the federal assembly.

**Electoral system**

In the 2007 and 2011 elections to the State Duma, all 450 deputies were elected from party lists on the basis of proportional representation with a threshold of 5% of the vote. In 2016, elections to the State Duma reverted to a mixed system, with 225 deputies elected from party lists and the remaining half from single-member districts using a first-past-the-post system.

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

**'Managed democracy': Party of power, system opposition**

Even on paper, the 1993 Constitution tilts the balance of power heavily in favour of the president, who appoints the government and has the power to dissolve the parliament, whereas the parliament can only impeach the president with great difficulty. In practice, in the virtually feudal ‘power vertical’ regime headed by Vladimir Putin, the rubber stamp parliament has even less power to shape policy. The political system is tightly managed to preserve an appearance of democratic legitimacy, while heading off any serious challenges to the regime. Since 2000, all federal elections and the vast majority of those at regional and local level have been won by United Russia, the ‘party of power’ created as a vehicle to channel support for Putin. Little real competition comes from ‘system’ opposition parties, i.e. those which are recognised and tolerated by the authorities.

A pre-election crackdown on opposition activists, independent media and civil society

Rather than from docile system parties, resistance to Putin’s rule has come from a disparate array of bloggers, political activists, non-governmental organisations and independent media outlets. Leaders of this non-system opposition include anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny and, until his assassination in 2015, Boris Nemtsov (five Chechen men were convicted of murdering him; however, it is not known whether they were acting on orders from a higher authority). Non-system politicians have faced gradually intensifying repression, as well as legal and sometimes physical harassment; some, such as Nemtsov, have even paid with their lives.

Navalny has been a thorn in the side of the authorities, exposing corruption (a video produced by his Anti-Corruption Foundation of a lavish Black Sea palace allegedly built for Vladimir Putin was watched 120 million times), organising mass protests, and mobilising anti-United Russia voters (smart voting, see below). Navalny and other regime opponents have faced fines and (mostly) short prison sentences. Despite this, until recently the authorities never attempted to completely stamp out such activities, apparently acknowledging their role as a safety valve in a system that was otherwise completely under control. Ever since his unexpectedly strong performance in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, where he won 27% of the vote despite relentlessly negative coverage in state media, Navalny himself has been excluded from political life; he was barred from standing as a presidential candidate in 2018 on the basis of a suspended sentence, and electoral authorities refused to register his Russia of the Future party; however some other non-system activists were permitted to stand in, and occasionally even win elections, at least at local level.

In 2020, repression stepped up a gear, with moves to consolidate the regime and eliminate the few remaining pockets of resistance. The June 2020 constitutional referendum – which passed...
comfortably with a 78% majority – allows Putin to serve two additional presidential terms, after his current term (the last one that would have been allowed under the previous Constitution) expires in 2024. In August 2020, Navalny survived what was apparently a bungled attempt by the Federal Security Service (FSB) to poison him. Returning from treatment in Germany he was immediately arrested and sent to jail for nearly three years. Soon afterwards, the courts ruled that organisations linked to Navalny were ‘extremist’, forcing them to close down; they also slapped charges on his associates ranging from violation of coronavirus safety rules to incitement of minors to join illegal rallies, forcing many of them into exile. Speaking from prison in August 2021, Navalny noted that repression had entered a new phase and acknowledged that it had achieved its tactical goal of silencing his movement ahead of elections.

Civil society and the media have also come under increasing pressure. Since 2012, foreign-financed political NGOs are at risk of being officially stigmatised as ‘foreign agents’, which is forcing many of them to close down. The scope of foreign agent legislation has been progressively expanded to include media, social media users and – since December 2020 – even individual activists. In April and August 2021 respectively, the label was applied to Meduza news site and Dozhd TV, two of the most prominent independent media outlets. Under separate legislation, several groups linked to oligarch-turned-Putin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky have been closed down as ‘undesirable organisations’. Many observers see these measures as a part of a concerted campaign to silence critical voices ahead of the Duma elections.

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A difficult context

Surveys by independent pollster Levada Centre show that, following a period of relative optimism from 2014 to 2018, when sentiment was buoyed by the ‘Crimea effect’, dissatisfaction has risen; in August 2021, while 48% still believed that Russia was ‘heading in the right direction’, a nearly equal share (44%) felt that the country was ‘on the wrong track’ (Figure 1). Another Levada poll shows that in August 2020, seven out of the top 10 problems identified by Russians had to do with the economy: the latter include

Impact of Covid-19 in Russia

Excess mortality data suggest that over half a million Russians have died of coronavirus, and a sluggish vaccination campaign has failed to rein in new infections, which continue to spread. Nevertheless, the pandemic does not appear to have influenced public opinion much, except insofar as it contributed to the continued decline in living standards (in 2020, the economy shrank by 3%; however, it is forecast to rebound by over 4% in 2021); in an August 2020 poll, fewer than 3% mentioned coronavirus as one of their main concerns.
inflation, unemployment, poverty, and the huge gap between rich and poor (Figure 2). In contrast to ostentatious displays of wealth by the country’s oligarchs, ordinary Russians are feeling the impact of years of negative or low economic growth; in 2020, real disposable income, which measures the amount of money left in people’s pockets after essential expenses have been paid for, fell to its lowest level since 2009. Endemic graft among the political elite, highlighted by the Putin Palace video, is another long-standing concern identified by respondents. With no signs on the horizon of political change or effective action by the country’s current leaders to tackle long-standing structural problems, such as poverty and corruption, observers are increasingly comparing Putin’s Russia with the stagnation of the Brezhnevea.

Who will take part?

Under new rules introduced in 2014, parties are automatically eligible to present lists of candidates for the 225 seats elected by proportional representation, if they meet one of the following three conditions: they received 3% of more of the vote in the 2016 State Duma elections; they hold at least one seat in a regional parliament; they have collected 200,000 signatures in at least 29 of Russia’s 85 regions. As of 7 July 2021, 30 parties met these criteria. For the 225 seats elected from single-member districts, independent candidates must collect signatures from at least 3% of the electorate in their constituency.

United Russia: The party of power

United Russia will struggle to repeat its 2016 performance

The pro-Putin United Russia has held a majority in the State Duma ever since 2003, and it achieved its best ever result in 2016, when it won a three-quarters majority (343 out of 450 seats). However,
despite its electoral dominance, the party struggles with its image as a 'party of crooks and thieves', an epithet coined by Alexey Navalny ahead of the 2011 elections.

Although it benefits from being identified with Putin, United Russia has never been able to match his high approval rates. In 2016, United Russia won just over half (54%) of the vote, well below the 80-90% rate of respondents' approval for Putin's performance at the time. In July 2018, Putin's approval rate fell by an unprecedented 13% following the announcement of an unpopular pensions reform, which raised the retirement age by five years, and in April 2020 it briefly dropped below 60% for the first time ever since 1999, although it has recovered slightly since then to 61%. Opinion polls show a corresponding decline in support for United Russia, now at around 30% (see below), compared to 15% for the Communist party. Although United Russia remains by far the largest party, the gap between it and its competitors has significantly narrowed since 2016, when it won four times as many votes as the Communists.

**Efforts to ensure a strong pro-Putin parliamentary majority**

Over the years, Kremlin and party strategists have tried various methods to ensure a strong pro-Putin parliamentary majority. After the 2011 elections, United Russia's relatively poor electoral performance (49% of the vote, even after industrial-scale vote-rigging) prompted speculation that the All-Russia People's Front, a pro-Putin movement established the same year and separate from the party (though sharing many of its members), could eventually replace it as an electoral vehicle. Another ploy, used in the 2019 elections to the Moscow regional assembly, is for pro-Putin candidates to stand as independents, despite most of them being party members. Putin himself has always remained at arm's length from United Russia and does not belong to it.

However, in the 2021 elections, it seems that the country's leaders have decided to focus on strengthening United Russia rather than looking for alternatives. A key move came in January 2020, when Putin announced a government reshuffle, appointing Mikhail Mishustin as prime minister and moving Dmitry Medvedev (who remains party chair) to the lower-profile position of deputy Security Council chair. In his previous capacity as head of the tax service, Mishustin acquired a reputation as a competent technocrat, whose digitalisation drive transformed Russia's creaky tax system. Replacing the increasingly unpopular Medvedev helped to raise the government's approval rating from just 33% in August 2018 to 46% in August 2021. However, this does not appear to have boosted support for the party (Mishustin himself is not a party member, but most of the government ministers are).

In an effort to attract votes, Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov – according to a February 2021 poll, the country's fourth and fifth most trusted politicians (Figure 4) – will head the United Russia party list (this does not oblige them to take up their Duma seats if elected). Continuing a practice first introduced at federal level in 2016, the May 2021 primaries attracted a record 12 million votes; the party list now features several new faces, including media personalities and (as a result of the pandemic) hospital administrators. The recent revival of the All-Russia People's Front – not as an electoral vehicle but as a forum for discussing and assessing public opinion on current issues such as government management of the pandemic – could also help the party to reach out to the electorate. Despite the party's drive to appear in touch with the grassroots, analysts are sceptical, describing it as a mere instrument for presidential power, with little tolerance for deputies who deviate from the political line directed by the top.

**System opposition: Communists and Liberal Democrats**

In the 2007 and 2011 elections, only three other parties managed to break through the 5% threshold for parliamentary seats: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and Fair Russia. The Communists and Liberal Democrats are at the opposite ends of the ideological scale. For the Communists, Russia should turn its back on capitalism, nationalise key economic sectors and return to a planned economy. Neither liberal nor democratic, the Liberal Democrats are a far-right populist party that advocates recovering
all former Soviet territories, promoting traditional values and Christianity, supporting families, and clamping down on illegal migration.

Despite these ideological differences, the two parties have much in common. Both are long-term fixtures on the Russian political stage, offering voters few new faces or ideas; Vladimir Zhirinovsky, now in his 70s, has been at the head of the Liberal Democrats since the party was founded in 1991, while 77-year-old Gennady Zyuganov has led the Communists for nearly as long. Both are nostalgic for the past, although for different historical periods; whereas Zhirinovsky would like to reconstitute the Russian Empire, the Communists favour the Soviet era. Xenophobic, sexist and loud-mouthed, Zhirinovsky is a maverick whose more eccentric proposals have included nuclear strikes on Turkey for downing a Russian plane and legalised polygamy as a solution for alcoholism; by contrast, Zyuganov has been described as a ‘dreary apparatchik’. In a February 2021 poll, 9 % of respondents expressed trust in Zhirinovsky, compared to 32 % for Putin; Zyuganov scored a mere 4 %.

Despite largely avoiding criticism of Putin, both parties confront the government from time to time. In 2017, the Communists accused Dmitry Medvedev of economic mismanagement, and in 2018, they organised protests against the pensions reform. In 2021, after electoral authorities barred Pavel Grudinin, the party’s 2018 presidential candidate, from standing in parliamentary elections on the grounds of formerly owning property abroad, Zyuganov reacted furiously to what he called the ‘fascistisation’ of the country. For his part, Zhirinovsky accused the authorities of using ‘Stalinist-era methods’ after the 2020 arrest of popular Khabarovsk governor Sergey Furgal on murder charges.

For the most part, however, both Liberal Democrats and Communists appear content to offer only token opposition. On foreign policy issues, they broadly support Vladimir Putin’s agenda, and neither has much interest in improving ties with the West. In 2020, not one single deputy from either party opposed the constitutional changes that gave Putin the option of another 12 years in power. Although the Communists often denounce elite corruption, Zyuganov refuses to make common cause with Navalny, who he describes – echoing the Kremlin line – as a ‘foreign agent’ intent on instigating a ‘colour revolution’.

Since 2018, both Communists and Liberal Democrats have benefited to some extent from declining support for the ruling party. In September 2018, with outrage at the pensions reform at its peak, United Russia incumbents lost to two Liberal Democrats and one Communist in three of the 22 regions where gubernatorial elections were held that year, and only managed to win a fourth after a re-run and exclusion of the Communist candidate. In 2019, one year after the Liberal Democrats won the governorship of Khabarovsk, they also took control of the regional assembly (Sergey Furgal was replaced by another Liberal Democrat in 2020), while the Communists gained several additional seats in Moscow; in 2020, there were further setbacks for United Russia in Tomsk and some other Siberian cities. However, in all three years the vast majority of United Russia and other pro-Putin candidates held onto their seats at city council, regional assembly and gubernatorial level. In view of this, an opposition breakthrough in 2021 seems unlikely.

Modest levels of support for parliamentary opposition parties could suggest that they are not seen as credible alternatives to United Russia. Rather than vote for them, many Putin opponents will
probably abstain; voter turnout has been on a declining trend since 2007, falling in 2016 to just 47% at national level, and a mere 28% in Moscow, where support for the opposition is relatively strong.

The third and smallest of the parliamentary parties is Fair Russia, headed by another veteran of Russian politics, the 68-year-old Sergey Mironov. Founded in 2006, it was originally envisaged by Vladimir Surkov – sometimes described as the architect of ‘managed democracy’ – as the regime’s ‘second leg’, capturing the votes of Putin supporters alienated by United Russia. In line with this role, in 2007 Mironov pushed for Putin to be allowed to serve a third term. Emboldened by a record 13% share of votes in 2011, the party asserted its independence by joining post-election protests sparked by allegations of vote-rigging. However, since then the party has gone back to supporting the Kremlin. In the 2018 elections, it decided not to field a presidential election; Mironov reasoned that there was no reasonable alternative to Vladimir Putin, and that the party’s values would be best served by attempting to limit United Russia’s influence over the president’s agenda.

In 2016, Fair Russia only scraped past the 5% threshold to keep its proportional representation seats. For 2021, the goal of the party – whose members include Hollywood actor Steven Seagal – is to come second after United Russia. Its drive to win more votes could be helped by its January 2021 merger with two other nominally left-wing parties, For Truth and Patriots of Russia – even though For Truth’s traditionalism sits uneasily with Just Russia’s social democratic platform.

On the fringes of the system is Yabloko, a centrist liberal party. Reflecting its pro-Western orientation (the election manifesto calls for normalisation of relations with the EU and the US, and an international conference on the future of Crimea), the party is affiliated to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, a pan-European grouping of centrist parties. From 1993 to 2007, Yabloko was represented in the State Duma, but since then its share of the vote has progressively declined. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, it won 2% of the vote, while in 2018 its veteran leader, Grigory Yavlinsky, scored just 1% as presidential candidate. Nevertheless, the party still has some influence at regional level, for example in the Moscow regional assembly where it holds four out of 45 seats. Although the party as a whole has refused to endorse Navalny, Yabloko politician Lev Shlosberg was barred from standing in the election due to his alleged support for the imprisoned activist.

Opinion polls suggest that none of the remaining registered parties has enough support to win any party list seats. However, some could score isolated victories in single-member districts, as happened in 2016, when Rodina (Fatherland) and Civic Platform won one seat each. A 6 September opinion poll suggests that the Russian Party of Pensioners for Social Justice (4.6% of voting intentions) and New People (4.2%) are possible newcomers. Navalny associates have dismissed New People as a Kremlin project, designed to split the opposition vote without harming United Russia’s prospects.

Non-system opposition

The non-system opposition is almost entirely excluded from the elections. Not only Navalny and his associates, but also many other independent politicians face a choice between jail and exile; one of them is ex-Duma deputy Dmitry Gudkov, who formerly represented Fair Russia and Yabloko. In June 2021, Gudkov fled to Kyiv after police searched his flat and held him in custody for two days.

The People’s Freedom Party (PARNAS) is now the only significant registered party campaigning on an openly anti-Putinist platform. Like Yabloko, it is affiliated to the Alliance of Liberals and
Democrats for Europe. Its former leaders include Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Kara-Murza, who survived not just one but two attempted poisonings. The current chair is Mikhail Kasyanov, prime minister during Putin's first presidency. Judging by its dismal performance in 2016, when it won just 0.9% of the national vote, the party hardly represents a serious threat to the regime. Nevertheless, in June 2021, just after PARNAS appeared on the list of eligible parties, the justice ministry suspended registration of the party for three months, in what Kasyanov described as an effort to purge the electoral field of all opponents to the status quo.

Two years ago, similar measures to exclude non-system candidates from the elections to the Moscow regional assembly triggered massive demonstrations. However, there have been no major protests since January and February 2021, when thousands rallied to demand Navalny’s release. Levada Centre polls measuring 'protest potential' show a relatively high number of people (19%) ready to take to the streets; an usually harsh response to the January protests, when police arrested thousands and demonstrators were threatened with jail sentences of up to eight years, may have deterred further mobilisation.

Smart voting – Putin opponents' last remaining weapon

Launched by Navalny in 2018, ‘smart voting’ is a tactical voting initiative aimed at defeating United Russia. The system scored its first major success in 2019, in the above-mentioned Moscow elections; after the authorities refused to give in to protests and reinstate non-system candidates, Navalny’s team identified system opposition candidates in each Moscow district that stood the best chance of beating United Russia, and urged voters to back them. In the end, the ruling party saw its majority slashed from 38 out of 45 seats to just 25 – an embarrassing setback, though not all observers are equally convinced that it was due to ‘smart voting’. In local and regional elections one year later, similar calls for tactical voting appear to have had less of an impact; there were opposition gains in Tomsk and Novosibirsk city councils, but no electoral upsets in the 18 regions where gubernatorial elections were held.

The 2021 elections will be the first national elections in which smart voting will be deployed. It remains to be seen how much disruption this will actually cause. The biggest potential is probably in single-member districts where United Russia candidates have only minority support, and where tactical voting could help to prevent the opposition uniting behind a single challenger. The experiences of 2019 and 2020 suggest that many voters will be willing to try smart voting in opposition strongholds such as Central Moscow and Siberia. However, for all their scepticism of United Russia, Russians in most other parts of the country are even less convinced by Alexey Navalny; Levada Centre figures show that just 4% trust him. Furthermore, now that his movement has been disbanded, it is not clear who will run the project. Therefore, although it could produce electoral upsets in some districts, the system seems unlikely to succeed in mobilising voters across the country.

Nevertheless, official efforts to ban or disrupt smart voting suggest that authorities see Navalny's electoral initiative as a serious threat. A document dating from 2020, cited by independent news site Meduza and purporting to be the electoral strategy of United Russia’s Moscow branch, names smart voting as one of the main ‘information risks’ for United Russia; it proposes a similarly named smart vote website, designed to mislead voters into backing United Russia candidates. Whether or not the document was genuine, Navalny associates claim that several fake smart voting websites have come online. Meanwhile, media regulator Roskomnadzor has blocked the original website, which informs users of the candidate to vote for, based on their electoral district; so far, Google and Apple have not complied with Roskomnadzor’s request to remove the app from their app stores.
What will be the results?

According to the Russia Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM), for most of July and August 2021 United Russia polled at around 30%, much lower than the 45% target that the party has set itself, or its share in previous elections. Given that VCIOM is a state-controlled entity, there might be reasons to suspect that actual levels of support are even lower than this; however, its results do not significantly differ from those of the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) or the Levada Centre, which has no state affiliation.

Despite these low figures, the party is not expected to lose its majority. Turnout in 2016 was 48% and is likely to be similarly low this year, given that over 30% of voters are either undecided or do not intend to vote. According to one analysis, low turnout benefits United Russia, as opposition supporters – seeing little point in voting in the absence of genuine competition – are more likely to abstain. The electoral system also favours United Russia as the largest party; not only does it gain the lion’s share of support that fall below the 5% threshold, but also first-past-the-post voting will give it a disproportionate share of single-member seats. As a result, with 54% of the vote in 2016 it won 76% of seats (62% of party list seats and 90% of single-member districts). Taking these factors into account, analysts from TsPK (Centre for Current Politics) calculate that, at current levels of support, United Russia could still win around 300 seats (66%) – just enough to hold onto its two-thirds majority needed to amend the Constitution. Falling below this threshold would be a blow to the party’s prestige, but would have little practical effect: the amendments of July 2020 were the first major overhaul of the Constitution since its initial adoption in 1993, and further changes are unlikely to be necessary during the next five years. With the balance (or rather, imbalance) of power remaining intact, there is little reason to expect political change from the Duma over the next five years.
Will the vote 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. However, the party’s electoral victory came at a heavy cost, triggering the largest protests seen since Putin came to power. To avoid a similar debacle in 2016, Russia’s leaders set out to create a favourable environment for electoral victory without the need for vote-rigging – not only by clamping down on independent media and civil society but also by amending the electoral system, for example by re-introducing single member districts.

In 2011, Central Election Commission Chair Vladimir Churov was nicknamed 'The Wizard' for his part in conjuring up a United Russia victory. To improve the image of the 2016 elections, Human Rights Ombudsman, Ella Pamfilova, known for her more independent stance, was brought in to replace him. In 2016, while noting the negative impact of ‘restrictions to fundamental freedoms and political rights, firmly controlled media and a tightening grip on civil society’, as well as ‘numerous procedural irregularities’, OSCE/ODIHR observers assessed that overall, the vote was ‘transparently administered’. Independent Russian election monitors Golos recorded 3,768 complaints of possible irregularities – a worryingly high number, but still an improvement on 2011 (7,800).

Under new leadership, electoral authorities have become somewhat more independent of the Kremlin. In April 2016, one of Pamfilova’s first moves in her new role was to cancel municipal elections held in the village of Barvikha near Moscow after complaints by pro-Navalny candidates. However, hopes that she would stand up for a fairer vote were disappointed in 2019, after she defended the wholesale exclusion of opposition candidates in Moscow. Apart from expressing scepticism about the grounds for excluding Yabloko candidate Lev Shlosberg due to extremism, she has done nothing to stop the continuation of such practices in 2021.

There are several worrying signs that the authorities are preparing for large-scale electoral fraud, possibly as a last resort in the event that United Russia fails to garner enough votes to secure a convincing majority. Although perhaps justified by the need to curb the spread of coronavirus infections, the precedent of the 2020 constitutional referendum suggests that scheduling the vote over several days facilitates vote-rigging. Moreover, six regions including Moscow are allowing internet voting for the first time – a step towards boosting voter turnout, but one that could also allow manipulation of the results.

In September 2021, investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta published what it claims is a leaked audio file. In the recording, Moscow election officials appear to be discussing how to falsify the results to give a ‘certain party’ – presumably United Russia – 45% of the party list vote.

For the first time since 2007, the OSCE has decided not to send election observers to monitor the 2021 elections. According to an OSCE statement, Russia was willing to host just 60 observers, far fewer than the 500 needed for credible monitoring, a restriction which it felt could not be justified by the pandemic. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which would normally have participated in the OSCE-led mission, will send a symbolic delegation of five observers, while the European Parliament – whose most recent observation mission to Russia was in 1999 – will not send any. That leaves the contingent from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a group of former Soviet countries, as the only substantial international presence. Representing mostly Russia-friendly authoritarian regimes, CIS observers are unlikely to provide a very rigorous assessment of the vote; in August 2020, they gave a clean bill of health to Belarussian presidential elections, condemned by the EU as fraudulent.

Domestic election observers also face serious constraints. In August 2021, Russia’s justice ministry added election observation NGO Golos to its list of foreign agents. Golos has pledged to continue its monitoring work, but the label will undermine its credibility and deter volunteer observers. In a further blow to transparency, the Central Electoral Commission decided that only direct participants in the electoral process, such as candidates and election officials, would have access to round-the-
clock streaming from 50,000 polling stations; according to the commission, there is not enough funding to allow the general public to watch. Yabloko contested the decision on the grounds that it violates electoral rights, but the Supreme Court declined to consider its complaint.

EU position

In July 2021, the European External Action Service Spokesperson, Nabila Massrali, expressed concerns about decisions restricting or banning Russian NGOs and media by designating them as 'foreign agents' or 'undesirable organisations'; Massrali described these decisions as an attempt to quash critical voices from the Russian public sphere ahead of the September elections.

Similarly, the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee report on EU-Russia relations, due to be voted in plenary on 15 September 2021, criticises the Kremlin's efforts to destroy 'political competition by stealing the opportunity of fair election', drawing parallels with the Belarusian presidential elections of 2020. The report calls for more EU pressure to defend the Russian people's right to free and fair elections, which it argues should be a precondition for dialogue. If the elections are fraudulent, the committee feels the Parliament should be prepared not to recognise Russia's parliament and to call for Russia's suspension from international organisations with parliamentary assemblies such as the Council of Europe.

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