

Jędrzej Jander

The Outlook for This Year's Elections to the State Duma in Russia

In September 2026, elections to the State Duma—the lower chamber of the Federal Assembly—will take place in the Russian Federation. Although Russia's system of power is built primarily around the prerogatives and authority of the president, the Duma remains one of the most important institutions of this formally democratic federation. Over more than two and a half decades of Vladimir Putin's rule, elections to the State Duma have functioned both as a test of popularity and an image-building exercise for the ruling party, United Russia, and as a mobilization challenge for an increasingly marginalized democratic opposition. Given the pronounced economic slowdown in which this year's elections will be held, the authorities will seek to maintain full control over the electoral process and to minimize the public visibility of their critics. Otherwise, the election campaign could give prominence to new leaders of the democratic opposition—provided they succeed in attracting and engaging a significant number of dissatisfied yet previously passive citizens. Most of the opposition's established leaders currently reside abroad, creating space for the emergence within Russia of new movements and figures critical of Vladimir Putin's rule.

The specific nature of elections to the Russian parliament. Elections to the State Duma are conducted by universal and secret ballot. A mixed electoral system is in force: half of the deputies (225) are elected in single-member constituencies, where a plurality (or a simple majority) is sufficient to win a mandate. The remaining half of the 450-seat chamber is elected at the federal level from party lists, with mandates allocated proportionally according to the number of votes obtained by each list. A 5% electoral threshold applies, meaning that lists receiving a smaller share of the vote are excluded from the distribution of seats via the party-list voting. This electoral formula, combined with the ruling authorities' capture of state institutions responsible for administering elections, results in a substantial advantage for United Russia over other political groupings. The most recent elections to the lower chamber of the Russian parliament were held in 2021—prior to the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. United Russia secured 324 seats, or 72% of the total. By comparison, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the second-largest force in parliament, won 57 seats (12.67%).

Ideas for the election campaign. This year's vote will be the first federal-level election conducted under conditions of a marked economic slowdown observed since the second half of 2024 (see ["IEŚ Commentaries" No. 1396](#)). United Russia is seeking to mobilize veterans of the war in Ukraine by involving them both as candidates on electoral lists and as activists and observers at polling stations. Vladimir Yakushev, chairman of United Russia's General Council, informed Vladimir Putin that in 2025 veterans won 890 mandates in local elections across various cities and regions—almost three times as many as in 2024.¹ Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasized that participants in the "special military operation" should occupy an increasing number of increasingly influential positions within the structures of power. This direction is confirmed by recent reports concerning the placement of candidates at the top of United Russia's federal list for this year's Duma elections. Alongside well-known politicians with long experience in the highest state offices—such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and former president and prime minister Dmitry Medvedev—the leading positions on the list include Yevgeny Poddubny, a prominent war correspondent covering the conflict in Ukraine, and Vladislav

¹ "Vladimir Yakushev dolozhil Vladimиру Putinu ob ispolnenii yego porucheniy «Yedinoy Rossiyey», Lenta.ru, 15.12.2025, <https://lenta.ru/news/2025/12/15/vladimir-yakushev-dolozhil-vladimиру-putinu-ob-ispolnenii-ego-porucheniy-edinoy-rossiey/> [26.01.2026].

Golovin, chief of staff of Yunarmiya² and a participant, among other operations, in the siege of Mariupol in 2022.³ These actions are part of the ruling camp's broader strategy to project an image of a society united around the state's military effort and accepting no credible alternative to the current government.

The role of the opposition. Despite retaining its dominant position in the 2021 elections, United Russia won 19 fewer seats than in the previous, seventh convocation of the State Duma (2016–2021). One factor contributing to this weaker result was the campaign conducted between 2018 and 2021 by opposition politician Alexei Navalny and the Anti-Corruption Foundation (Fond bor'by s korruptsiyey, FBK) that he founded. A central element of this campaign was the "Smart Voting" initiative, which aimed to concentrate anti-government vote on a single selected opposition candidate (including candidates from the so-called "systemic" opposition⁴) in order to maximize the chances of defeating United Russia's nominee in a given constituency. The relative effectiveness of this strategy was demonstrated, among other cases, in regional elections in Moscow in 2019 and in Tomsk in 2020.⁵ "Smart Voting" could not be fully implemented in the 2021 State Duma elections due to the Russian authorities' preventive use of repressive measures against Alexei Navalny and organizations associated with him. Navalny was arrested in January 2021, and in June of the same year the FBK was designated an extremist organization and outlawed. At the same time, legislation entered into force stripping individuals associated with organizations deemed extremist of passive suffrage.⁶ Finally, just days before the elections, the application used to coordinate "Smart Voting" was blocked in Russia and—under pressure from the authorities—removed from major platforms such as Apple and Google.⁷

New mobilization strategies. After 2022—under conditions of war, repression, intensified censorship, and the outlawing of major organizations—the Russian democratic opposition was forced to undertake coordinated actions aimed not so much at achieving immediate electoral success as at maintaining visibility in the public sphere. Such efforts were undertaken, for example, during the presidential election in May 2024. After the Central Election Commission blocked the candidacy of Boris Nadezhdin, who had been supported by most opposition circles, the principal joint initiative became the action "Noon Against Putin." This initiative involved voters opposing the authorities arriving at polling stations at a designated time—noon on the final day of voting. Long queues formed outside many polling stations, particularly in large cities.⁸ The FBK called on voters to cast ballots for any candidates other than Vladimir Putin, which to a limited extent represented a continuation of the "Smart Voting" concept.

At present, the main coordinators of opposition activity remain organizations operating in exile. These include, among others, the Russian Anti-War Committee (bringing together figures such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Garry Kasparov, Sergei Guriev, Boris Zimin, and—until recently—Vladimir Kara-Murza) and the FBK (Yulia Navalnaya, Leonid Volkov). An important role is also played by unaffiliated opposition politicians (e.g., Ilya Yashin), civic

² Paramilitary youth organization under the auspices of the Ministry of defence of the Russian Federation.

³ «Yedinaya Rossiya» vybrala liderov spiska na vybory v Gosdumu», rbc.ru, 19.01.2026, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/01/2026/696cfaca9a7947d68ec3dacb> [26.01.2026].

⁴ The so-called "systemic opposition" in Russia consists of political parties whose formal independence and parliamentary presence are tolerated by the regime in exchange for political loyalty and support for the president's key policy directions. These parties currently include the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), A Just Russia, and New People.

⁵ See "When it works in 2020, Tomsk was the only place in Russia where 'Smart Vote' propelled candidates to a city-council majority. Here's what happened in the year that followed", meduza.io, 21.09.2021, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/09/21/when-it-works> [26.01.2026].

⁶ Federal Law № 157-F3 of 04.06.2021.

⁷ "Pochemu Apple i Google udalili prilozheniye «Naval'nyy»? Kto otvechayet za sboy k dostupu v Google Docs? Budut li v Rossii zamedlyat' internet? Otvechayet advokat «Roskomsvobody» Sarkis Darbinyan," meduza.io, 17.09.2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/09/17/pochemu-apple-i-google-udalili-prilozhenie-navalnyy-kto-otvechaet-za-sboy-k-dostupu-v-google-docs-budut-li-v-rossii-zamedlyat-internet> [26.01.2026].

⁸ „Polden' protiv Putina» Glavnoye sobytiye prezident-skikh vyborov — masshtabnaya aktsiya oppozitsii. Vot kak eto bylo," meduza.io, 17.03.2024, <https://meduza.io/live/2024/03/17/posledniy-den-vyborov-v-rossii-polden-protiv-putina> [26.10.2026].

activists (e.g., Anastasia Burakova), and journalists (e.g., Maksim Katz). Among openly oppositional figures remaining within the Russian Federation is Boris Nadezhdin, who was a would-be candidate in the most recent presidential election. Ahead of the upcoming Duma elections, the unifying slogan adopted by the opposition has become "Enough" (Russian: *Khvatit*), to which—according to its initiators—various negative phenomena associated with Vladimir Putin's rule can be added, such as "enough of corruption," "enough of war," or "enough of repression." The slogan "Enough" has been adopted as a tool of symbolic mobilization, functioning both offline and online in the form of a hashtag. An equally important symbol of this initiative is the first letter of the word in Russian spelling—"X"—intended as a symbolic counterweight to the letter "Z," which has been used by supporters of the regime and the war since 2022.

Summary. The State Duma elections scheduled for September 2026 are of particular importance, as they will be held for the first time in years under conditions of a clear economic slowdown. This context encourages the growth of social discontent and increases the susceptibility of parts of the electorate to opposition messaging. At the same time, the specific features of Russia's political system and its mixed electoral model, combined with the executive's full control over the voting process, clearly favor United Russia. Experience from previous years shows, however, that even under such conditions the opposition has at times been able to puncture the ruling party's dominance by employing strategies such as "Smart Voting" and by forcing the Kremlin into embarrassing instances of electoral manipulation. Repeating this scenario in 2026 will be more difficult due to tightened internet censorship and the fragmentation of structures contesting the authorities. Nevertheless, the democratic opposition—although today geographically and organizationally dispersed—remains capable of temporarily overcoming internal divisions during an election campaign conducted against the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin. Of particular significance may be the emergence of a new, credible leader capable of consolidating support and sustaining hope for political success in the medium term—especially in the event of a weakening or collapse of the current regime.