

Russian Elections Take Place Without Real Opposition

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Executive Summary: Russia's September 18-20 Duma elections delivered United Russia its largest State Duma faction in history, while 49 war veterans won seats, advancing Russian President Vladimir Putin's effort to build a "new elite" tied to the war against Ukraine.

- The Kremlin further narrowed the space for electoral opposition by excluding Yabloko, while other opposition figures sought to coordinate protest voting and mobilize voters despite the risk of detention.
- Turnout reached 59.32 percent, the highest since 2011, amid reports of vote discrepancies, restrictions on independent observers, and the deployment of Cossacks and National Guard personnel at polling stations.

On September 18-20, Russia held its elections for the Duma, the lower house of parliament. Observers signaled the importance of the elections in prompting the regime to pause before launching a second mobilization and perhaps formally declaring a state of war (see EDM [July 23, September 14](#)). Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine four and a half years ago, but it is unclear whether it has declared a formal, legal state of war. The legal status of war would permit harsher penalties on domestic dissidents and open the possibility of a full draft. The exodus of Russian men of conscription age in the last month suggests they see such actions as possible ([Meduza](#), September 23). Ukrainian long-range drone attacks on Russian cities and oil refineries have also made it difficult for the regime to maintain the pretense that this is not a war within Russia. This was underscored by the heavy Ukrainian drone attack on Moscow on the final day of voting ([Meduza](#), September 20). The timing could give the Kremlin additional justification for escalation.

Elections play several important roles in President Vladimir Putin's Russia. They still provide the regime with the semblance of legitimacy, send signals to elites about public sentiment, project stability, and can now also help Putin create a "new elite" from those who fought in his war against Ukraine. The ruling United Russia party initially said 86 war veterans had won seats, but later revised that figure to 49. Including war veterans rewards participation in the war while tying the political system more closely to the conflict ([Meduza](#), September 21). Because the outcome was never in doubt and United Russia secured its largest State Duma faction in history, the Kremlin could sometimes allow opposition parties to act as a pressure-release valve in Russia's controlled political system ([Meduza](#), September 21). The Russian Supreme Court's August 10 decision to remove the Yabloko opposition party's federal candidate list from the elections suggests that even limited avenues for electoral competition have narrowed ([24 Kanal](#), August 15). Protests against the falsification of the 2011 Duma election results grew into the largest demonstrations against Putin in the post-Soviet period and brought Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny to fame. The Kremlin presumably remains wary of the "smart vote" campaign initiated by Navalny, which encouraged voters to support the candidate most likely to win other than United Russia, often from one of the loyal "systemic" opposition parties, such as A Just Russia or the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. On Sunday, September 20, the main election day, protest actions took place outside Russia, organized largely by the Russian diaspora ([Meduza](#), September 20).

The “nonsystemic” opposition tried to influence the elections and the country’s politics. Russian opposition leaders Maxim Kats and Yuliya Navalnaya put aside their differences in a “difficult search for a compromise” to recommend candidates and parties other than the ruling United Russia. They jointly published recommendations for single-member districts and urged voters to support parties other than United Russia in the party-list vote. Navalnaya also called on people to arrive at polling stations at noon on Sunday as part of a coordinated protest intended to show opposition to the Kremlin’s policies and create visible lines at polling places ([Meduza](#), September 14). Even such relatively innocuous actions can result in detentions or arrests in Russia’s current political environment. Other ways for voters to express discontent include boycotting, voting “against all,” or voting for any party other than United Russia ([Meduza](#), September 14).

The Kremlin is accustomed to high turnout, and the 2026 elections saw the highest since 2011, at 59.32 percent ([Meduza](#), September 21). Russian opposition politician Ilya Yashin said that he could not vote in Yerevan as planned because of physical threats against him. Independent observers from the Yabloko party reported being denied access to polling stations, and whistleblowers reported other restrictions and violations. Reports also emerged of discrepancies in vote counts in St. Petersburg and Sakhalin. Russian analyst Ivan Shushkin noted discrepancies in available data from Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. More legitimately, roving bears in Irkutsk oblast meant authorities had to provide transportation for anyone wishing to vote after curfew ([Meduza](#), September 19). Taken together, these reports point to an electoral process in which participation was high while independent oversight and avenues to challenge the results remained constrained. The Kremlin secured the outcome it sought.

Alongside falsification, the regime also relies on the tried and tested method of voter intimidation. In Krasnodar krai, which can be considered a frontline region because of its proximity to the war, Cossacks and the National Guard provided security at polling places throughout the three days of the election. This falls under their remit of providing security to objects of critical infrastructure ([Komsomolskaya Pravda Kuban](#), August 11). In the city of Shakhty, in Rostov oblast, Cossacks acted as aides to the police “and living symbols of the history of our country” ([Shakhty-media.ru](#), September 19). Cossacks of the Orenburg host were also preparing to “protect the rights of every voter” by standing guard at the elections in the Chelyabinsk and Sverdlovsk oblasts ([Kazachestvo](#), August 26). These deployments also illustrate how the boundaries between electoral administration and the state’s security apparatus have become blurred. Uniformed security personnel at polling stations can intimidate voters, particularly in an already heavily controlled electoral environment.

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