

Kremlin handpicks new State Duma deputies in 'special election operation'

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Between 18 and 20 September, Russia held parliamentary elections to determine the make-up of the new 450-member State Duma, the lower house of parliament. The vote coincided with an annual series of regional and local elections. For the first time, parliamentary 'elections' were also held in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, where martial law remains in force and the civilian population is subject to systematic repression.

According to the official results, turnout reached 59.68%, while the party of power, United Russia, secured 57.96% of the vote and 349 seats, the largest parliamentary representation in the party's history. This result bears no relation to reality. According to independent estimates, United Russia's actual share of the vote may have been closer to 34%, with turnout below 40%.

The Kremlin intended the vote to serve as a plebiscite demonstrating public support for the continuation of the war against Ukraine, despite polling indicating that a majority of Russians favour the opening of peace negotiations. Only fully loyal, pro-war pseudo-opposition parties were permitted to participate but even their representatives could have been barred from running if they were likely to promote views considered incompatible with the Kremlin's interests, in particular those critical of the war.

The 'elections' took place amid growing dissatisfaction within Russia's political and business elites and among the wider public over the deteriorating economic, fiscal and security situation. So far, however, there are no clear indications that this discontent could develop into open opposition to the Kremlin. The vote also coincided with a further intensification of repression and tightening of censorship. At the same time, Vladimir Putin continues to demonstrate his determination to pursue the war against Ukraine and escalate Russia's systemic conflict with the West. The authorities are likely to use United Russia's strong official result as carte blanche from the public for a series of unpopular decisions. In the coming months, these may include compulsory military mobilisation, further increases in the fiscal burden and greater militarisation of the economy, with the aim of strengthening Russia's war effort and reversing its unfavourable position on the battlefield.



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The election operation: the system in full mobilisation

Electoral shows in Russia serve as stress tests of the administrative apparatus's efficiency and loyalty to the Kremlin, as well as of its ability to deliver the desired results and prevent public protest despite deteriorating socio-economic conditions. At the same time, the authorities' capacity to carry out large-scale electoral fraud with impunity, and suppress political pluralism and resistance demonstrates the regime's strength and 'sovereignty'. The underlying message is that full compliance with state power, coupled with the abandonment of hopes for a political alternative, offers the only way to survive within an increasingly repressive system.

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tial' conflict with the West. In the official propaganda narrative, the unity between the people and the authorities is meant to evoke the mobilisation of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, with Russia once again portrayed as fighting for its survival against Nazism. Given the discrepancy between this narrative and actual sentiment among the public and the elites, the state sought to exercise maximum control over the electoral process. They also relied on Vladimir Putin's personal authority: in the run-up to the vote, he increased his public activities, including visits to regions not exposed to Ukrainian attacks, and campaigned on behalf of United Russia (UR). In an address shortly before the elections, Putin called for a high turnout to demonstrate that millions of citizens, united by shared values, supported the army fighting at the front.¹

Preparations for the elections took place against the backdrop of continued restrictions on access to independent sources of information, increasingly aggressive pro-war propaganda, the promotion of war veterans as a new patriotic elite and a campaign targeting 'enemies of the people', 'traitors' and 'foreign agents'. This was accompanied by warnings that the West was preparing to interfere in the electoral process. At the same time, repression intensified not only against political opponents,² but also against individuals who publicised information considered undesirable by the authorities, including recordings documenting the effects of drone attacks on Russian cities.

In the weeks preceding the State Duma elections, support for the ruling United Russia party in opinion polls ranged between 33% and 37%. In the context of the Kremlin's increasingly neo-totalitarian course, such responses are likely to reflect views regarded as safe to express rather than respondents' actual political preferences. It can also be assumed that polling organisations were helping to prepare the information environment for an inflated official result for United Russia. The reported rise in Putin's approval ratings and support for his policies, despite the deteriorating situation and public mood, should be interpreted in a similar way.

Only ten political parties were allowed to take part in the elections, a record-low number. These included five parties already represented in parliament, none of which challenges the Kremlin's wartime

¹ В. Путин, *Обращение в преддверии выборов*, Президент России, 16 September 2026, kremlin.ru.

² Between 2021 and 2026, the average prison sentence handed down in politically motivated cases increased from 6.5 to 11 years. See: *Средний срок заключения по политическим делам в РФ вырос до 11 лет*, Радио Свобода, 17 June 2026, svoboda.org.

policy. Yabloko, the only party openly advocating peace, was removed from the party-list ballot. According to the independent ExtremeScan group, Yabloko could have received as much as 24% of the vote, compared with around 32% for United Russia.³ None of Yabloko's 99 candidates standing in single-member constituencies won a seat, while their campaigns were obstructed by the authorities in various ways. Novgorod Oblast was the only region where a Yabloko list was registered for elections to the regional legislature, in which the party is expected to secure only limited representation. A number of prominent politicians were barred from standing, including party leader Nikolai Rybakov, Boris Nadezhdin and Lev Shlosberg, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison for disseminating "fake news" regarding the activities of the Russian army in Ukraine.

Yabloko candidates were excluded from the elections on a range of pretexts, including designation as a 'foreign agent', administrative penalties for the alleged display

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of extremist symbols and purported copyright infringements involving campaign materials. The candidate lists of the loyal pseudo-opposition parties were also subject to careful screening. Particular attention was paid to representatives of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which traditionally attracts support by campaigning on social and economic issues; among those barred from standing was the popular politician Nikolai Bondarenko.

As part of Putin's project to promote a 'new elite', a sizeable group of war veterans stood as candidates: 186 in total, including 82 representing United Russia (UR).⁴ Ultimately, over 50 representatives of this group will enter the State Duma, 49 of them from UR.⁵ A significant proportion are likely to be officials and deputies who acquired the status of participants in the 'special military operation' after brief periods of service in rear areas, away from the front line. Although the state uses the image of frontline soldiers to legitimise the war, their social advancement has so far been largely symbolic: individuals from outside the system have not been granted significant access to real political influence or financial resources and are unlikely to gain such access in the future. At the same time, the presence of a group of veterans in the chamber is intended to serve as a reminder to other deputies of the overriding purpose of legislative activity: to make the continuation of the war possible.

The democratic opposition responded to the Kremlin's 'special election operation' by seeking to mobilise anti-war voters around what it regarded as the relatively safe available form of protest. The Anti-Corruption Foundation headed by Yulia Navalnaya, together with opposition activist Maxim Katz, urged voters to support candidates they identified as having the best chance of defeating United Russia representatives in individual constituencies. In this way, they were drawing on the 'smart voting' strategy popularised by Alexei Navalny. Yabloko called on voters either to back its candidates or to cast invalid ballots as a form of protest. The Anti-War Committee recommended voting for candidates whom voters considered least supportive of the war. Garry Kasparov advocated a boycott of the elections, while Ilya Yashin called on voters to cast their ballots at the same time on 20 September, following the model of the 'Noon Against Putin' initiative during the 2024 presidential election. The opposition's efforts remain largely symbolic and, given pervasive censorship, have little prospect of reaching a broader section of the public.

³ E. Koneva, *Party preferences of Russians ahead of the State Duma elections*, ExtremeScan, 10 September 2026, extremescan.eu/ru.

⁴ According to the Central Election Commission, 1,600 war veterans stood as candidates in elections at all levels, in which more than 20,500 seats were contested.

⁵ Before the 'elections', it was announced that 100 veterans would enter the new State Duma.

Three days of electoral farce and ‘patriotic’ results

Voting took place over three days, from 18 to 20 September,⁶ with 111 million Russian citizens formally eligible to participate. In regions bordering Ukraine and in the occupied territories, where martial law remains in force, voting began earlier. Regional authorities could schedule early voting at any point between 28 August and 17 September. As a result, early voting encompassed over a dozen or so million formally registered voters, including around 4 million in the occupied territories – citizens of Ukraine whom Russia has illegally incorporated into its legal system. Under Russian conditions, early voting allows for arbitrary manipulation of the official results and make independent verification effectively impossible.

Also, more than 6 million Russians voted online;⁷ this year, the procedure was available in 33 regions, which created additional opportunities for manipulation that are impossible to monitor independently.

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Across Russia, there were reports of voters dependent on the state, particularly public-sector employees, being pressured to take part in the elections. Pressure was also exerted on observers nominated by parties other than United Russia. On 18 September, 1,300 observers representing the CPRF and Yabloko were deprived of their right to monitor the vote; many others were prevented from carrying out their duties, while some were detained or assaulted. The case of Yulia Kuznetsova, a Green Party candidate in Moscow, who was detained and reportedly intimidated on the eve of voting, attracted particular attention.⁸

Independent observers assessed the scale of repression and administrative pressure as significantly greater than during the previous parliamentary vote in 2021. Numerous irregularities were reported, including ballot stuffing, substantial inflation of turnout figures – which correlated with increases in the number of votes cast for pro-government candidates,⁹ violations during voting outside polling stations (a procedure permitted under Russian law), improper storage of ballot papers and significant discrepancies in party results between neighbouring electoral commissions. On 20 September, voting was suspended for several hours at a number of polling stations in Moscow, officially because of a failure in the system used to issue paper ballots. Opposition groups interpreted the incident as an attempt to suppress support for United Russia’s competitors, as opposition-minded voters tend to cast their ballots on the final day of voting and avoid the opaque electronic voting system. The resulting queues meant that some voters were unable to cast their ballots before polling closed.

According to the official figures, turnout reached 59.68%, its highest level in more than a decade. United Russia was reported to have won 57.96% of the vote and 209 of the 225 single-member constituencies, giving it a record 349 seats in the 450-member lower house of parliament. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) came second with 13.65% (its representation in the State

⁶ The State Duma elections were accompanied by a annual series of regional and local votes, including direct gubernatorial elections in eight regions and elections to regional legislatures in 39 regions.

⁷ В ЦИК раскрыли, сколько россиян проголосовали на выборах онлайн, News.ru, 20 September 2026.

⁸ “Явка в полтора раза ниже, у “ЕР” 35–40%”. Специалисты по выборам оценивают масштаб вбросов на выборах в России и то, что случилось в Москве, Настоящее Время, 21 September 2026, currenttime.tv.

⁹ Compared with the results of 2021 parliamentary election, the number of regions recording anomalously high turnout increased; St Petersburg was among those added to this group, with turnout rising by more than 10 percentage points without any apparent explanation. See: На выборах в Госдуму появились новые кандидаты в «электоральные султанаты», Агентство, 19 September 2026, agents.media.

Duma will decline compared with the 2021–26 term). It was followed by the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) with 8.96% and New People with 7.91%. The latter is widely regarded as the least pro-war of the parliamentary parties, and its relatively weak result is likely to be used by the Kremlin to suggest that there is little public support for ending the war against Ukraine. A Just Russia also crossed the electoral threshold, receiving 5.14%.

Independent estimates based on statistical analysis of electoral patterns and anomalies suggest that United Russia's actual level of support may have been around 34%.¹⁰ If so, the party's official result may have been inflated by a factor of between 1.5 and 1.7.

Context: growing tensions among the Russian public and elite

In the months preceding the 'elections', Russian society increasingly experienced the mounting costs of the war, which contributed to a marked deterioration in public sentiment. Surveys pointed to growing pessimism, declining confidence in the future, heightened anxiety and an increasing sense of having little control over one's own life.¹¹ Interest in emigration rose to its highest level since autumn 2022.¹² According to the Levada Center, around 60% of Russians, including more than 71% of young people, currently favour peace negotiations (even though most of them expect a settlement to be reached on Russia's terms). Some 61% of respondents say that the war has had a negative impact on their own lives and those of their families.¹³ The demand for normalisation reflected in opinion polls appears to be one of the few relatively reliable indicators of underlying public sentiment. At the same time, Russians are becoming increasingly accustomed to the prospect of a prolonged war, with half of respondents expecting it to continue for more than a year.

The immediate sources of growing public frustration include regular Ukrainian attacks on Russia's energy, logistics and transport infrastructure, including oil refineries, oil terminals, ports and warehouses

operated by major e-commerce companies such as Wildberries and Ozon. Other factors include fuel shortages resulting from supply disruptions, internet blockades, inflation, rising fiscal burdens and fears of another wave of mobilisation. These pressures are compounded by the consequences of the budget deficit generated by wartime expenditure, including reduced access to healthcare, medicines and education, as well as the degradation of municipal infrastructure and the natural environment. Russia's demographic crisis is also deepening rapidly, with wartime losses contributing significantly to this trend. It is estimated that at least 500,000 people have so far been killed at the front, while the total number of killed and wounded has exceeded 1.4 million.¹⁴

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” Despite heavy wartime losses and the growing risk of recession, the Kremlin shows no intention of revising its priorities. It continues to focus on increasing expenditure on the war, internal security and propaganda.

¹⁰ «Это агония системы». Российские власти могли «нарисовать» на выборах в Думу каждый третий голос, The Moscow Times, 21 September 2026, ru.themoscowtimes.com.

¹¹ «Люди становятся беднее и злее». Индекс счастья россиян обвалился до 15-летнего минимума, The Moscow Times, 20 August 2026, ru.themoscowtimes.com; Т. Рожанский, В России резко вырос уровень пессимизма: «Люди говорят, что дальше будет хуже, и готовятся к худшему», Настоящее Время, 21 August 2026, currenttime.tv.

¹² Россияне стали почти в два раза чаще интересоваться эмиграцией из-за страха мобилизации, The Moscow Times, 19 August 2026, ru.themoscowtimes.com.

¹³ Конфликт с Украиной в августе 2026 года: внимание, поддержка, отношение к переговорам, представления о сроках спецоперации, ее влияние на жизнь респондентов, Левада-Центр, 1 September 2026, levada.ru.

¹⁴ «Мрачный и беспрецедентный рекорд». Потери российской армии в Украине достигли 1,4 миллиона человек, The Moscow Times, 1 July 2026, ru.themoscowtimes.com.

on increasing expenditure on the war, internal security and propaganda. Forecasts by the Central Bank of Russia indicate that the economy could stagnate completely this year, while the financial performance of most sectors points to a further deterioration in economic conditions. Extensive internet censorship¹⁵ and pervasive surveillance are accompanied by the growing use of digital technologies, including bots and artificial intelligence, in disinformation campaigns targeting domestic audiences. These efforts include fabricated reports of battlefield successes, attempts to portray unpopular government decisions as beneficial to society, and the continued demonisation of the West.

The state is increasingly shifting the costs of the war onto society and business, while weakening the market-oriented sectors of the economy that have so far enabled Russia to adapt relatively effectively to sanctions and expand military production. At the same time, the Kremlin has effectively acknowledged its inability to protect key economic infrastructure by obliging asset owners, under threat of expropriation, to organise their own defence against air attacks.¹⁶

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Russia’s political and business elite has growing reason to fear for both their assets and personal security, partly due to Ukrainian military operations; state protection has, among other measures, been strengthened for senior military commanders and some prominent propagandists. The authorities are also intensifying their so-called fight against corruption, involving arrests and asset seizures targeting members of the elite, while accelerating the redistribution of property through nationalisation and reprivatisation. These measures are intended to centralise the distribution of the ‘corruption rent’ within Putin’s inner circle, discipline the elite and increase state revenues. In the first half of 2026, assets worth more than \$10 billion were nationalised, indicating a significant acceleration of this process compared with the previous year.¹⁷ The Kremlin is also compelling the wealthiest businessmen to make ‘voluntary’ contributions to the budget in an effort to reduce the deficit.¹⁸ A further source of concern within the elite is the strengthening position of the Federal Security Service (FSB) at the expense of other interest groups, which is increasing the system’s repressive pressure on the elite itself.

Dissatisfaction with the Kremlin’s policies is growing within Russia’s administrative and business circles.¹⁹ Meeting Putin’s expectations regarding macroeconomic indicators is becoming increasingly difficult, while failure to do so may expose individual officials to repression. Technocrats responsible for economic performance and public finances have very limited influence over the leader’s decisions, even when these directly affect the areas under their remit.²⁰ According to independent media reports, members of the elite are increasingly transferring assets abroad and relocating their families to countries they regard as safe, including the United Arab Emirates.

¹⁵ M. Domańska, K. Chawryło, *The Great Russian Firewall. The Kremlin’s ultimate crackdown on internet freedom*, OSW, 19 December 2025, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁶ I. Wiśniewska, *Putin’s decree: a state unable to protect the economy*, OSW, 28 August 2026, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁷ Российские власти изъяли \$10 млрд активов за полгода, *The Moscow Times*, 6 August 2026, ru.themoscowtimes.com.

¹⁸ These contributions, made at Putin’s request by Russian businessmen and companies withdrawing from the Russian market, amounted to 384 billion roubles (approximately \$4.6 billion) between January and August 2026. See: «Добровольные пожертвования» в бюджет РФ с начала 2026 года достигли рекордных 384 миллиардов рублей. Их платят уходящие из России компании и российские бизнесмены (по просьбе Путина), *Meduza*, 18 August 2026, meduza.io.

¹⁹ M. Domańska, *Rising tensions within the Russian elite: a mounting challenge for the Kremlin*, OSW Commentary, no. 731, 18 May 2026, osw.waw.pl.

²⁰ К. Красовская, *Собянин: Переход экономики РФ на военные рельсы убьет страну*, *Deutsche Welle*, 5 August 2026, dw.com/ru.

Outlook: more aggression and repression

The conduct of the parliamentary 'elections' demonstrates the Kremlin's continued ability to implement its political objectives despite an increasingly unfavourable environment. It also represents a personal success for Sergei Kiriyenko, who oversees domestic politics within the Presidential Administration and has consistently sought to strengthen his position within the system. The display of full control over the domestic political situation is intended to demoralise those dissatisfied with the authorities by depriving them of any hope for a political alternative or a change in the Kremlin's course, and by compelling them to adapt and remain obedient. Whether this strategy will prove sustainable in the longer term remains an open question. At the same time, the Kremlin seeks to signal to the West that Russia remains politically cohesive and that neither sanctions nor offers of dialogue are capable of undermining this unity.

Despite the lack of credibility of the official results,²¹ the outcome of the 'war plebiscite' will give the Kremlin *carte blanche* to justify unpopular decisions, likely to be taken in the coming months, by invoking the 'will of the people'. These measures will be aimed at achieving a breakthrough in the war and may include a new wave of military mobilisation, higher fiscal burdens, further compulsory contributions from big business, deeper militarisation of the economy and an escalation of conflict with the West, particularly with countries on NATO's eastern flank. As public frustration grows, the authorities are also likely to intensify repression pre-emptively, further restrict access to views deemed politically inconvenient and dismantle the remaining structures capable of articulating opposition views.

In the near term, the Kremlin is likely to seek to reverse, at any cost, the unfavourable situation on the battlefield by committing the maximum resources available against Ukraine. It will probably calculate that a military victory could translate into a genuine increase in public support for Putin's policies, as has occurred following previous acts of aggression against neighbouring states, before Russia plunges into a serious economic crisis.

²¹ According to ExtremeScan, only around 30% of Russians surveyed said they believed the elections would be conducted fairly. See: E. Koneva, *Party preferences of Russians ahead of the State Duma elections*, *op. cit.*