

Russian Parliamentary Elections 2016: A lifeline is needed for the non-systemic opposition

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Putin's United Russia party emerged as the absolute winner of the 18 September [parliamentary election](#), winning a higher than expected 54% of the popular vote (+5%), and taking 76% of the seats in the State Duma (+24%). The result significantly strengthens the party's dominance in the Duma and reinforces President Putin's position ahead of the 2018 presidential elections. It also suggests that the Kremlin's carefully balanced mix of coercion and concessions has successfully silenced the demands for major democratic reforms, which had been voiced at street protests during the 2011 parliamentary elections. Without external support, non-systemic liberal parties risk becoming even more marginalised in the future. The EU should invest in civil society initiatives to assist liberal Russian democratic forces in an increasingly autocratic political environment.

Unsurprising results

The election results were in many ways anticipated: United Russia was expected to stay in power and the parliament's composition remained similar. The so-called systemic opposition parties – those sitting in the parliament and offering token opposition – split the remaining 24% of the seats three-ways: 9.3% for the Communist Party, 8.7% for the Liberal Democratic Party and 5.1% for A Just Russia. All non-systemic opposition parties failed to reach both the 5% threshold to enter parliament and the 3% threshold to qualify for state funding. This will negatively affect the main liberal opposition party Yabloko, which secured state-funds in 2011 and will now lose [about half of its budget](#). Furthermore, with a mere 47% participation rate, these elections saw a record low voter turnout. This partially reduces the size of United Russia's success and demonstrates growing political disaffection. Sluggish campaigns and the timing of the elections also contributed to the low turnout. Finally, numerous procedural irregularities were noted, including ballot box stuffing and carousel voting. Overall, the OSCE Election Observation Mission deemed the elections more transparent than those of 2011, but serious challenges to democratic commitments remain.

The Kremlin's winning strategy

The clear victory of United Russia is not surprising given the Kremlin's post-2011 strategy. The regime managed to divert the responsibility for Russia's crippling economy with a series of measures that further delegitimised the non-systemic opposition, and de-mobilised civil society, reducing potential catalysts for protest.

First, *limited concessions* met some of the demands of protestors, aiming to reduce the grounds for accusations that the regime was undermining democracy. Party registration was liberalised, the threshold to enter parliament was lowered and independent candidates were allowed to stand. Nevertheless, these measures did not really affect the election results: the 5% threshold was still too high to allow new parties in the Duma and excessive registration requirements limited the number of independent candidates.

At the same time, *restrictive legal measures* tightened the government's control over NGOs, dissidents and the United Russia party. Legislation restricting civil rights such as the infamous foreign agents, internet and defamation laws increased government control over civil society. Laws tightening the supervision of foreign assets and business activities of officials and state corporation's employees increased the Russian elite's dependence on the Kremlin, while discouraging them from running for government. For the first time, major [party lists](#) were filled with easy to control party functionaries and public servants, instead of the usual business figures.

Coercive actions targeted towards non-systemic opposition leaders reduced the potential for 2011-like street protests by increasing the fear factor and raising the consequences for protesting. The smear campaign against the president of the People's Freedom Party (PARNAS), Mikhail Kasyanov, the politically motivated legal prosecution of the most visible opposition member and Progress

Party leader, Alexei Navalny, the poisoning of PARNAS deputy chairman Vladimir Kara-Murza and the killing of Boris Nemtsov, co-chairman of PARNAS, had both a de-mobilising effect on the general population – which fears the consequences of taking a political stand – and a destabilising effect on Russia’s already weak non-systemic opposition, which lacks strong roots in civil society and relies mainly on politically strong individuals.

Finally, with the promotion of a renewed patriotic narrative – strongly anti-Western and equating criticism of the government to anti-patriotism – the Putin regime managed to silence and delegitimise the non-systemic opposition, while shifting away responsibility for the government’s failures. Through this lens, the West bears the responsibility for Russia’s crippling economy and Yabloko and PARNAS’ criticism of the annexation of Crimea was not a criticism of the government, but an anti-patriotic act. Under these conditions, opposition forces resort to self-censorship in order not to be branded as anti-Russian.

Non-systemic opposition: small, divided, unknown, and in need of a lifeline

The aforementioned measures only partially explain the bad results of non-systemic opposition parties. Several conditions prevented – and will most likely continue to prevent – non-parliamentary opposition from expanding its influence.

Unity has always been an issue for non-systemic political opposition forces in Russia, most notably for the liberal democratic forces who repeatedly failed to pull forces together to pass the threshold. The sectarian nature of their conflicts will most likely continue making cooperation difficult. *Funding* is clearly a challenge for small parties with a weak or non-existent membership base. According to Central Election Commission [figures](#), in 2014 United Russia’s official funding was 14 times higher than Yabloko’s and 688 times higher than PARNAS’. After having failed to qualify for state funding at these elections, finances will become even scarcer for Yabloko. The lack of *media access* and public visibility are a serious issue for non-systemic opposition parties. According to the Russian [election watchdog Golos](#), mass media favoured United Russia 20 times more than Yabloko and 50 times more than PARNAS. Without access to mainstream media, non-systemic opposition parties cannot challenge the official discourse nor propose their own narrative. Finally, opposition forces operate in a difficult *civil society environment*. According to a 2016 [poll](#) by Levada, only 52% of Russians believe that Russia needs an opposition and less than half of the population knows of the very existence of the leading non-systemic opposition figures, like Khodorkovsky (45% – Open Society), Yavlinsky (44% – Yabloko) and Navalny (36% – Progress Party). The same names also figure among the top three least trusted opposition members.

The EU’s role in supporting civil society

The election results revealed the Kremlin’s strengthened authoritarian track and the extreme weakness of the non-systemic opposition. However, although weak and marginalised, liberal opposition parties and civil society organisations (CSOs) play an essential role in the fight for democratic pluralism and the respect of human rights.

Although the laws on foreign agents and financial transactions severely limit viable channels to support Russian CSOs, the EU should not refrain from supporting their fight. However, expanding direct financial support to Russian CSOs could prove counterproductive, with more NGOs being labelled as foreign agents. The EU and its members should rather invest in programmes providing opportunities for people-to-people contacts, like those falling under the Erasmus+ umbrella. CSO platforms like the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum should be strengthened and the scope of their activities expanded. Attention should also be devoted to programmes assisting and supporting civil society activists who left Russia because of political prosecution. Finally, support for quality European Russian-speaking media space could also play an important role in balancing communication.

With Putin’s likely re-election in 2018 looming at the horizon, the EU should do more to support Russia’s liberal democratic forces to ensure that likeminded actors can influence the regime and foster a pluralistic debate within Russian society. A process which should help in shaping a more cooperative agenda and relationship between the European Union and a democratic Russia.

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