

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Russia

### Preelection assessment

*Legislative elections set for September 2021*

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The September elections to Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, are an opportunity for United Russia to retain its grip on the country's legislative body. United Russia, the pro-Putin party, has maintained majority control of the Duma since 2003, including winning supermajorities in the 2007 and 2016 elections. The opposition in Russia is divided into two factions: the systemic opposition, comprised of nominally rival parties to United Russia that agree to pose no real challenge in the Duma, and the genuine opposition, which lacks any representation in the parliament. The latter face not only barriers to registration and campaigning, but also rampant abuse of administrative resources by pro-regime forces and widespread propaganda efforts by state-run media.

Putin and United Russia depend on elections to provide a patina of legitimacy in the eyes of the public, but the electoral environment has become more unpredictable for the ruling elite due to the opposition's innovative messaging and voting strategy. Despite the formal and informal advantages favoring United Russia, some opposition candidates have improved chances to win a seat in the Duma due to a "smart voting" strategy. The strategy, coordinated by the team of Alexei Navalny, Russia's most influential opposition figure, identifies and informs citizens of the candidate most likely to defeat United Russia's choice. In response to growing uncertainty, the regime's repressive tactics against the opposition are gradually increasing in severity, including, most notably, the poisoning of Navalny in August 2020. Russian authorities arrested Navalny when he returned to Russia in January after recuperating abroad. Days later, his team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation published a YouTube video highlighting the scale of corruption of the Putin regime, which led to nationwide protests. The government typically restricts freedom of assembly and responded to the "unsanctioned" protests with mass arrests and use of force. In addition to the tight control over opposition activities, Russian voters face their own set of constraints during the election, ranging from pressure from employers and peers to limited ability to access reliable information.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Blocking of websites and social media:** Sensitive political and social content is regularly blocked in Russia and access to small social media platforms or messaging apps is sometimes restricted. While wholesale blocks of major messaging platforms are not common practice and the two-year block of Telegram was lifted in June 2020, in March 2021 the telecoms regulator, Roskomandzor, threatened to block Twitter if it failed to remove "banned content" from its platform. Separately, in February 2021, the Duma passed a bill allowing the Central Election Commission (CEC) to require Roskomnadzor to block websites involved in "illegal campaigning."

If signed into law, the new regulation would allow the CEC to circumvent judicial oversight, which could make it easier and faster to block online content through the electoral period.

- **Internet shutdowns:** The government sometimes restricts internet connectivity during politically sensitive moments, including elections. Disruptions tend to be targeted and local, rather than blanket shutdowns affecting entire regions or the whole country. Amid mass protests in advance of the September 2019 regional elections, authorities briefly disabled fixed and mobile internet connections and public Wi-Fi hotspots in parts of Moscow.
- **Influence operations:** Authorities have significant influence over the online information environment through an array of state-run and state-aligned media outlets and the widespread use of paid commentators and automated accounts. As Russians increasingly get their news from social media, rather than traditional sources, the potential impact of online influence operations grows. Persistent influence operations ahead of the election may impact public discourse and prevent voters from accessing reliable information.
- **Arrests and prosecutions:** A plethora of laws limit free expression, providing authorities with an adaptable toolkit to target people who speak out online. The range of criminal and administrative provisions includes penalties for sharing false news, for calling for extremism or separatism online, and for various forms of defamation and slander, including “defamation of power,” which prohibits spreading information that “exhibits blatant disrespect for society, government, official government symbols, constitution or governmental bodies of Russia.” In February, the editor of a media outlet who retweeted a satirical post that listed details about a pro-Navalny demonstration was arrested and sentenced to 15 days in jail for supporting an unauthorized protest.
- **Cyberattacks:** A range of actors are regularly targeted with cyberattacks, including independent media, civil society organizations, and opposition leaders. Cyberattacks in recent years have included DDoS attacks against media outlets and attempts to hack into Telegram and Gmail accounts associated with activists and journalists or media outlets. As pressure on critical voices grows ahead of the election, cyberattacks could be used to disrupt their reach or ability to function.

Russia has a score of 18 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House’s Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a consolidated authoritarian system where political engagement, free expression on and offline, and government institutions are controlled and personalized. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2021*, with a score of 20 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties; **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 30 out of 100; and as a **consolidated authoritarian regime** in *Nations in Transit 2020*, with a score of 7 out of 100 for the country’s democratic progress. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Russia country reports in [Freedom in the World](#), [Freedom on the Net](#), and [Nations in Transit](#).