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# **Elections in the Russian Federation**

## *2016 Parliamentary Elections*

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Eurasia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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September 18, 2016

# Frequently Asked Questions

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*Disclosure:*  
*These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Russian elections authorities as of September 18, 2016, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.*

## Who will be elected in the Russian State Duma vote scheduled for September 18, 2016?

On September 18, Russian voters will elect 450 Deputies to the Russian Federation State Duma (lower house of Parliament). These elections will be held under a new electoral system. Each Deputy of the Duma is elected to a five-year term. The last State Duma elections took place in 2011, which saw just under 60 percent voter turnout. The ruling United Russia party received just under 50 percent of the votes cast in that election.

Following legislative changes, half of the Deputies in the 2016 elections will be elected from party lists of candidates in one nationwide constituency, with the threshold lowered from 7 to 5 percent.<sup>1</sup> This change was made as part of several amendments to the election code since 2011. The remaining 225 Deputies will be elected in single-mandate constituencies under a first-past-the-post system.

The mixed system will replace the previous fully proportional system, introduced in 2007, in which all Deputies were elected on party tickets. On June 17, 2016, a presidential decree calling the election for September 18 instead of December 4 was signed following adopted legal amendments.<sup>2</sup> Elections to legislative bodies and for Governors, as well as mayoral and municipal elections, will be held in a number of federal subjects concurrently with the State Duma elections.

## What laws and regulations govern elections in the Russian Federation?

State Duma elections in Russia are governed by the Law on State Duma Elections, the constitution, and the Law on Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights. Additional legislation and supplemental instructions and resolutions of the Central Election Commission (CEC) govern various aspects of the elections.

The significant electoral amendments adopted since the last State Duma elections in 2011 have enabled broader political party registration and participation, permitted independent candidates to run for parliamentary seats, and restored direct elections for half of the Duma's 450 members in single-mandate constituencies. Other newly adopted regulations place restrictions on domestic civil society organizations, particularly those who previously received foreign funding for election observation purposes through the so-called "foreign agents legislation."

Regarding campaign finance, political parties that received more than 3 percent of votes in the previous State Duma elections are eligible for state funding support for the 2016 elections. The spending [limit for](#)

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<sup>1</sup> The change to the threshold percentage for proportional representation (party list) voting from 7 to 5 percent was signed into law by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in February 2014.

<sup>2</sup> On June, 17 2016, a presidential decree moving the election date to September 18 instead of the original date of December 4 was signed following amendments adopted to the election legislation as initiated by United Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and Fair Russia. The Communist Party and other, non-parliamentary parties opposed moving the date, claiming that the constricted timeline would negatively affect their ability to collect sufficient signatures for registration of candidates in time for the elections.

[the 2016 elections](#) is 700 million RUB for a party and 40 million RUB for a candidate, although these limits exclude expenditures made by a party's regional branches from their own electoral funds.

## **What bodies will administer the elections?**

The Russian Federation has a five-tier system of election administration, with the Central Election Commission (CEC) at the head. Following the CEC there are Subject Election Commissions, Constituency Election Commissions (ConEC), Territorial (rayon, city and other) Election Commissions, and Precinct Election Commissions. All commissions except are permanent bodies appointed for five-year terms.

The current CEC was appointed in March 2016 and consists of 15 members nominated by the State Duma, the Federation Council and the President. Two CEC members are women, including (for the first time) the Chairperson, Ms. Ella Pamfilova. Women comprise almost half of the members of election management bodies in the Russian Federation and chair almost half of the commissions. In areas where national minorities comprise a significant proportion, campaign materials and ballots are available both in Russian and other relevant languages. As in the past elections, a number of polling stations across the country will be equipped with touch-screen voting machines, electronic ballot counting scanners, and web cameras inside polling stations in cities with populations over one million persons.

## **Who is eligible to run for office?**

Any citizen with voting rights who will have attained the age of 21 by Election Day is eligible to be elected, except anyone holding citizenship or residency of a foreign state, such as a dual-citizen. Registered political parties can nominate candidates at the national (party list) level and for single mandate (majoritarian) constituency elections, while any eligible citizen can run independently in a single-mandate constituency election. The formation of electoral blocs is prohibited.

## **What is the state of political parties?**

At present, four parties have representation within the State Duma: United Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, A Just Russia and the Communist Party. There have been changes to the legislation on political parties and elections over the past five years. Regarding political parties, changes to the laws in 2012 simplified the party registration process and led to an increase in the number of parties from seven in 2011 to 74 in 2016, of which 14 will be competing in the September 18 vote. The 2013 election law also eased requirements for parties to participate in federal elections. This does not mean that every party was able to register without difficulty, but in general the system requirements were eased to the degree that more parties were able to enter the electoral arena.

## **How are voters registered to vote?**

All Russian citizens over the age of 18 are entitled to vote, except those serving a prison term, regardless of the gravity of their crime, or those recognized as incapable by a court. The majoritarian contests additionally require either a registered permanent residence in that constituency or a temporary residence for at least three months before Election Day. As of July 1, 2016, the [number of registered voters](#) was 111,624,248, including 1,886,947 residing abroad. The voter registration is a passive system,

linked to the Ministry of Internal Affairs citizens' residence registration maintained by their local offices. Separate lists are compiled for voters abroad and those in hospitals, sanatoriums, detention centers and "other places of temporary stay." Voters can check online whether they are registered and what is the location of their polling station. In cases of error, voters can be added to voter lists on Election Day after presenting national passports confirming their residence registrations. Voters who present absentee voting certificates will also be [added to the voter lists on Election Day](#), without court decision, which is against international good practice.<sup>3</sup>

## **Is out-of-country voting allowed?**

Out-of-country voting is allowed for citizens of the Russian Federation residing abroad through Russian embassies and consulates. However, these citizens are eligible to vote in the nationwide proportional representation (party list) elections only.

## **Who will monitor the elections?**

According to the electoral law, party and candidate representatives as well as media and international observers can gain accreditation to observe the electoral process. The election law, however, does not provide for nonpartisan citizen observation. Representatives of citizen observer groups often instead register as media and/or party observers. International observation groups will include representatives of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, and the Commonwealth of Independent States, and other international observer delegations. Some organizations, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, have not been invited to observe the elections.

## **What is the current political situation in the Russian Federation?**

Support for President Vladimir Putin and the ruling United Russia party remains high, although voters have grown more skeptical due to the difficult economic situation in the country. Still, the regime has been able to leverage Russian nationalism and sacrifice in what is being purported as a zero-sum contest with the West, with Russia's very survival at stake. Russian voters are under few illusions of where policy is made, and regard the Duma elections less as decisive in that regard and more as a reaffirmation of presidential rule and the direction set for the country by the President's team.

The challenges of the domestic situation have to some degree been glossed over or given perfunctory attention in favor of foreign policy and relations with external actors, which are accorded preeminent importance in day-to-day affairs, including the situation in Ukraine, Syria, and generally in relations with the West and the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> See the Council of Europe's Commission for Democracy through Law's (Venice Commission) *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters*, section I.1.2. Available at: [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2002\)023rev-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2002)023rev-e).

## **What is the electoral climate in Russia ahead of the elections?**

The pre-election environment has been calm, although the campaign has been a bit more robust due to the inclusion of 14 political parties (an increased number due to changes in electoral regulations that eased party registration). The main topics of discussion include the socio-economic situation, foreign policy issues, and the need for political stability and continuity. Public interest in the elections has been tepid, as most voters understand the Duma's weaker role vis-à-vis the executive apparatus. As the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes](#), "while overall confidence in government institutions increased after the annexation of Crimea, the Duma's approval rating—which jumped from 25 percent in 2013 to 40 percent in 2015—has stayed well below those of Putin, the government, and the army. Russian political parties remain perennially at the bottom of both political and institutional approval ratings." Additionally, citizens have shown "little interest in the numerous changes in election laws, which have been amended nearly 900 times since 2002."

The United Russia party continues to court younger voters through its youth branches, and has the advantage of media access and use of state administrative resources to its advantage. While opposition parties acknowledge the political inertia and economic challenges in the country, and target regional leaders or political appointees with charges of corruption and favoritism, they are careful in their criticism of the government directly or President Putin. Televised political party debates have been a welcomed addition to the 2016 campaign, however, and some of the statements of candidates and party representatives have been particularly spirited.

## **Why are these parliamentary elections important?**

In Russia's bicameral Parliament, the State Duma is the only directly elected house, with the Federation Council's (upper chamber) 170 members chosen by regional government officials.<sup>4</sup> This election will, in many ways, be as much about the strength of the President as of the Parliament, with the next presidential elections slated for 2018.

While the ruling United Russia party is again projected to be the strongest contender, three additional parties – the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, A Just Russia, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia – are likely to win the largest remainder of the 225 party-list seats in the Duma. Nevertheless, the distribution of seats in the new Duma is not expected to change significantly, thus helping promote continuity in Russia's current political regime and avoiding major challenges to the regime's legitimacy at a time when it is using nationalism to confront perceived external threats to the country.

The use of the "external threat" paradigm and zero-sum relationships with the West also helps to deflect some attention away from internal issues, such as the significant challenges to the Russian economy. With tighter controls on media, political opposition, domestic civil society organizations, and

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<sup>4</sup> The Federation Council is filled by two Representatives from every territorial region within the Russian Federation: one from the executive and one from the legislative body of the particular region concerned.

international organizations,<sup>5</sup> political discussion in the run-up to these elections, while at times energetic, has nonetheless been more measured than before the last State Duma elections in 2011.

## **What were the results of the previous State Duma elections in Russia?**

As a result of the 2011 parliamentary elections, four political parties are represented in the State Duma. The governing United Russia party won 238 out of 450 seats in 2011, with the remaining seats claimed by the Communist Party (92 seats), A Just Russia (64 seats), and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (56 seats). All seats were won via proportional representation (party list) with a threshold of 7 percent. The system was revised in 2014, with a threshold of 5 percent approved and re-introduction of a single-mandate majoritarian component for half of the mandates (225 seats), and the reduction of party list seats to 225 out of the total of 450.

## **What are the rules that govern the media?**

Election campaigning through the media began on August 20. The legal framework governing media and elections includes the constitution, the law on State Duma elections, and the Law on Basic Guarantees, which accord equal coverage of candidates/political parties and allotment of free coverage through state-funded media. Twice as much free airtime is granted to party candidates as compared to candidates running independently. The Central Election Commission (CEC) is charged with overseeing the media's compliance with campaign regulations, and a CEC-led working group for media-related issues was established for this purpose. For these elections, and in general, television is the key source of information, followed by online media.

## **What is the legal process for electoral dispute adjudication?**

Complaints at polling stations are made in writing to the Precinct Election Commission Chairperson. They may be appealed to a higher-level election commission by the complainant. Russia has a five-tiered system of election commissions, meaning that the Central Election Commission (CEC) can ultimately weigh in on a complaint or dispute if raised to this level. Further, the Supreme Court can rule on specific cases upon appeal, according to Article 99 of the election code adopted in 2014. As noted by the CEC, "election commissions are responsible to carry out inquiries in connection with these (complaint) applications" and "respond immediately to applications received on the voting day or the next day."<sup>6</sup> The Office of the Prosecutor General presently maintains a working group dealing with the implementation of electoral legislation, and a hotline for reporting electoral violations.

## **When will the results be announced?**

Preliminary results are announced by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and posted on its website the day after the elections, September 19. By October 8, the CEC will officially publish in its *CEC Journal*

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<sup>5</sup> The Foreign Agents Law requires non-profit organizations that receive foreign donations and engage in "political activity" to register and declare themselves as foreign agents. It was introduced and passed into law in 2012, going into effect in November of that year.

<sup>6</sup> See the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation's [website](#) for more information.

election results as well as provide information on voter turnout based on protocols from regional election commissions. By November 17, the CEC will publish in its *CEC Journal* the full results of the elections, including full data from the Precinct Election Commission-level on voter turnout and biographical information on all elected Deputies to the State Duma. The *CEC Journal* is posted online on the website of the CEC, where it will be kept for at least one year from the day of the official publication of the results of the election of Deputies of the State Duma.<sup>7</sup>

## What are preliminary impressions of Election Day?

*(Note: This question was added to these FAQs after publication on Election Day, September 18).*

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems has some preliminary impressions based on the experience of Election Day. While the election was largely seen as transparent and well-managed at the higher levels, with the professional conduct of the Central Election Commission (CEC) earning widespread confidence among election stakeholders, the performance of lower-level election commissions was uneven, with several problems reported nationwide with the vote counting process (many Precinct Election Commissions [PECs] relied on hand counts, with some counts performed out of view of candidate/party or international observers). Many PECs did not post the protocol of results for public viewing, which is in violation of the code. In addition, there were reports of carousel voting, ballot stuffing, forced voting, and irregularities involving absentee ballots. For its part, the CEC presented preliminary results, broken down by region, and acknowledged shortcomings at some polling stations, which will be addressed.

Preliminary voter turnout reported by the CEC was 48 percent, with the ruling United Russia winning 343 seats of the 450 seats in Parliament (it previously held 238), a dramatic increase in their parliamentary majority. The Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and A Just Russia also gained seats which, together with United Russia, will again comprise the vast majority of parliamentary mandates.<sup>8</sup> In the annexed territory of Crimea, where voting in a Russian national elections took place for the first time, voter turnout was officially reported at 42.37 percent (there are reports that Crimean Tatars boycotted the voting in Crimea). There were no western-affiliated international election observers in Crimea. In Kyiv and Odesa, activists with the right-wing parties Svoboda and Right Sector protested the elections, blocking entrances to Russian Federation embassies and consulates that were open to accommodate eligible Russian voters living in Ukraine.

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<sup>7</sup> See the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation [website](#) for more information.

<sup>8</sup> It is reported that in the single-mandate elections, one seat each went to Rodina, Civic Platform and to an independent candidate. See the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation's [website](#) for more information.