

Russian elections take place amid deepening economic and geopolitical crisis

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Elections to the Russian State Duma are to be held on September 18. The so-called “party of power,” the pro-Kremlin United Russia (UR), is expected to retain control over parliament. The vote takes place under conditions of a deepening socioeconomic crisis and escalating geopolitical tensions with the imperialist powers.

Fourteen parties are running candidates in the elections, four of which have representatives in the current parliament. This includes the three parties of the “systemic” opposition; Gennady Zyuganov’s Communist Party of “red” Russian nationalists and Stalinists; Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s far-right, chauvinist Liberal Democratic Party; and A Just Russia, a member party of the Socialist International, headed by former Federation Council Chairman Sergey Mironov.

These organizations act not so much as opponents of the current government, but as obedient participants in a loyal opposition called upon to assist in supporting the current regime’s image.

Media reports indicate that, regardless of results of the elections, the current parliamentary opposition parties will be represented in the new Duma as a result of the Kremlin’s manipulations of election procedures and behind-the-scenes agreements on the allocation of parliamentary seats.

In the previous parliamentary elections in December 2011, a significant number of voters cast ballots for parties other than UR. This frightened the Russian government, which subsequently sought to minimize the likelihood that such a scenario would be repeated.

The elections were advanced from December to September in order to reduce the duration of the election campaign to a minimum, such that it would take place under conditions when the majority of Russia’s voters are on their summer vacations or away in the countryside.

Legislative term limits were also extended. Members of parliament now serve five instead of six years, and the president is in office for six instead of four years. This measure also had the effect of creating a gap in time between the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Finally, reinstating a process that was abolished in 2003, half of the parliamentary seats will be allotted not by proportional representation, but by a first-past-the-post method in single-seat

districts.

All of these measures are antidemocratic in character and intended to deprive the population of the ability to influence the election results.

Under President Yeltsin in the 1990s, parliamentary elections were held as an immediate prelude to the presidential election. The Duma elections in December 1995 were separated from the presidential election in June 1996 by just half a year. The success of the pro-government party in the parliamentary elections, which had been achieved from the very beginning by means of crude falsifications, became the basis for the winning of the main “prize”: the triumph of the Kremlin’s candidate in the presidential election.

In the 2000s, the interval was reduced to three months. Vladimir Putin’s election as president in March 2004 was preceded by the parliamentary election of December 2003. The same process repeated for Dmitry Medvedev’s election in March 2008, and then once again for Putin’s election in March 2012.

The acute deterioration of the socioeconomic situation—the result of Western-imposed sanctions, a 50 percent fall of the ruble’s exchange rate, and the collapse of oil prices—altered the state of affairs.

United Russia, which embodies a thoroughly corrupt system built upon the unity of government and big business, is viewed with skepticism and hostility by much the population. The Kremlin, therefore, attempts to promote the idea that the president, as the “leader of the nation,” stands above state structures and inter-party disagreements, and cares about the people.

Putin has signaled a certain distancing from United Russia through the activities of the so-called People’s Front, formed in the spring of 2012, which constantly makes public criticisms of certain bureaucrats and thereby creates an appearance of a direct connection between the president and society.

The decision to separate the parliamentary and presidential elections (the latter will take place in 2018) is meant to give the ruling clique maximum discretion on the question which is most vital for it—the selection of the next president, whose authority must not be directly associated with the success or failure of the state’s current activities.

At the same time, the restoration of first-past-the-post elections in certain districts is meant to ensure United Russia a majority in the Duma regardless of the results of the party list votes. A significant number of United Russia supporters are running as nominally independent candidates in the single-seat districts.

All the other parties participating in the elections perform a primarily decorative function. According to polls and preliminary estimates, none of them has a real chance of overcoming the 5 percent threshold for entry into parliament. They differ little from the four official parliamentary parties, and are running campaigns built on virtually empty demagoguery—along the lines of “for all that is good and against all that is bad.”

Rodina [Motherland], the Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice, Communists of Russia, and Patriots of Russia call for the reform of Russian capitalism, with an emphasis on patriotism and slogans of social justice. The Green Party, Civic Platform, Civilian Power, and the Party of Growth contend that the same goals should be achieved by defending the interests of private entrepreneurship and the so-called middle class.

Grigory Yavlinsky’s *Yabloko* [Apple], which had a parliamentary faction in the 1990s and has been actively promoted over the past decade and a half as the only true “liberal opposition party,” belongs to a somewhat different category, as does the People’s Freedom Party (PARNAS), which has criticized the government more harshly than the other parties. Both of these parties serve as a channel for the expression of the views of the pro-Western liberal opposition. *Yabloko*’s leader Grigory Yavlinsky was coauthor of 500 Days, one of the programs for a forced transition to the capitalist market developed at the end of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*.

In PARNAS, the tone is set by a triumvirate consisting of former Prime Minister (2000-2004) Mikhail Kasyanov, the liberal nationalist Vyacheslav Maltsev from Saratov, and the Western conservative, Professor Andrey Zubov from Moscow. While Kasyanov insists that “Putin must go,” and Maltsev calls for “impeachment” of the president, Professor Zubov voices an anticommunist version of history, according to which the “Putinists” are “heirs of the Bolsheviks,” and Russia, as previously, is ruled by the “Cheka-NKVD-KGB.”

As the elections unfold, the government is desperately trying to hide the scale of its internal disagreements. However, the real state of affairs is expressed in the succession of corruption scandals involving security agencies, as well as the recent resignations of many key figures from among President Putin’s closest allies. The last such instance was the resignation of the former head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov .

On economic policy, there is intra-governmental disagreement between the “Kudrin line” and the “Glazyev line.” The proposals of former Finance Minister Aleksey Kudrin are focused on maintaining a regime of financial

stability and low inflation at all costs, which would necessitate raising the retirement age, a new, harsh reduction of social spending, and other austerity measures. The central bank, the ministry of finance, and a number of other key government structures support Kudrin in this.

In contrast, Sergey Glazyev, an economic adviser to the president, advocates a “mobilization” version of expanding the economy through credit for targeted state programs, as well as an increase in spending on wages and social needs. This supposedly should revive consumer demand and stimulate a recovery from the extended recession. Each side accuses the other of incompetence, threatening the bases of stability of the state.

In the first half of 2016, Russia’s GDP fell by 0.9 percent year-on-year, despite the temporary stabilization of the ruble and a modest improvement in a number of industries.

On issues of foreign policy, there are forces advocating a more aggressive attitude toward the West. There have been reports in the media that after the recent Ukrainian provocation in Crimea, there was discussion of the question of attacking Ukrainian territory in retribution. It is becoming increasingly difficult for President Putin to maintain the balance of forces in the highest echelons of the state and achieve consensus on the maneuvers in which he engages with the West, combining saber-rattling and militarist gestures with efforts to achieve compromise and agreement.

Whatever results the elections bring, the immiseration of the Russian working class will deepen. All sections of the ruling elite are united in their commitment to make the country’s workers pay the price of the socioeconomic and geopolitical crisis facing Russia. Post-Soviet capitalism has led the Russian masses into a dead end, the only exit from which is the program of international socialism—the continuation of the struggle initiated in the 1917 October Revolution under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, which will see its hundredth anniversary next year.



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