

## Political Opposition in Russia in 2018: Composition, Challenges and Prospects

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**ABSTRACT** Russia recently witnessed the re-election of its long-serving president. A constitutionally mandated term limit suggests this would be Vladimir Putin's last presidential term. As Russia enters a period of power transition, it is likely that a number of political actors will become relevant during this phase. This brief looks at the groups that form the opposition—those operating within the formal institutions and the major players outside it—to the incumbent government in Russia. The paper will examine their composition, their role in the current Russian political landscape and the influence they will wield in the future.

### INTRODUCTION

The year 2018 has been an eventful one for Russia so far. Amidst ever-expanding sanctions and worsening relations with the West, Russians re-elected Vladimir Putin as president. Most pre-election analyses left little doubt of the outcome. This marks the beginning of his fourth overall presidential term. Previously, he served as president for two four-year terms starting in 2000. He then

served as prime minister from 2008 to 2012. Following this, he was re-elected president for a six-year term in 2012.

President Putin is a popular figure: he received around 76 percent of the vote share with an official turnout of over 67 percent, and his approval ratings have remained in the 80s since 2014.<sup>1</sup> Russia's re-assertiveness in the

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foreign-policy sphere, particularly in Syria and Crimea, has partially contributed to this. The election, however, was marred by voter apathy due to the inevitability of the result and the absence of a viable alternative candidate. The turnout fell slightly short of the authorities' unofficial target of 70 percent. This was higher than the 65 percent turnout in the 2012 presidential elections. What makes this term significant for Russia is the possibility of it being Putin's last. The Russian constitution sets a two-consecutive term limit for the post of president. President Putin will not be eligible to run for the elections until 2030. He will be 77 at that point. Recent developments in China have raised the question of him staying on, but given the precedent he set by stepping down in 2008, this seems unlikely.

For the past 18 years, Russia has experienced a fairly predictable domestic political environment. However, it has now entered a period of transition. It will, therefore, be useful to look at the other major political actors in Russia's domestic sphere, particularly those whose outlooks differ from the government. The paper will focus on the parties, groups and figures that constitute the domestic political opposition in Russia, primarily as they have coalesced around the 2018 elections and the start of the subsequent term. It looks at their composition, the challenges they face and their future prospects.

## THE ELECTION PROCESS

Russia is a federal semi-presidential republic. It features a bicameral legislature—the Federal Assembly—and a powerful, directly elected presidency. The president is the head

of state and nominates the chairperson of the government, i.e. the prime minister. A majority of the State Duma, the lower house of the federal legislature, needs to approve this appointment. If the president's nominee is rejected thrice, the constitution allows them to dismiss the Duma and call for fresh elections.

The candidates for president must meet certain standard requirements. Criminal convictions render one ineligible to run. Candidates from political parties with seats in the State Duma have free access to the election, i.e. they do not need additional signatures. Those from non-Duma parties are required to collect 100,000 signatures in support of their candidacies, with no more than 2,500 from one of Russia's 85 federal subjects.<sup>2</sup> Independent candidates require 300,000 signatures with no more than 7,500 from one subject, and support from a group of at least 500 citizens. Earlier, the requirements were more stringent: while independent candidates required 2,000,000 signatures, non-Duma party-affiliated candidates needed 1,000,000.

In 2012, President Putin ran as a candidate of United Russia, the current ruling party. He was also the party's chairperson from 2008 to 2012. In 2018, he ran as an independent candidate, even though it would have been easier for him to run as a party candidate. This was likely done due to the growing unpopularity of the party itself and to demonstrate that he personally still enjoys the support of a broad segment of the population. There were seven other candidates.

As for the legislative elections, deputies of the State Duma are elected on the basis of two

lists: 225 of the 450 seats through party lists based on proportional representation, and the other half through single-member constituencies in a first-past-the-post system. This system has undergone changes too, from a fully proportional representational system that had been in place since 2003 to the current split re-established in 2013. The threshold for entering the Duma is currently five percent of the total vote. Five parties sit in opposition.

## **POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE STATE DUMA**

As of October 2017, Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) had registered 67 parties.<sup>3</sup> In the ongoing Seventh Convocation of the State Duma, six parties are represented. United Russia, the party in power, is the largest faction with 343 of 450 seats.

The second-largest faction in the Duma is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) with 42 seats. It was formed in 1993. Its leader, 73-year-old Gennady Zyuganov, has participated in every presidential election since 1993 (except in 2004) but chose not to run in 2018. The party instead nominated Pavel Grudinin, a businessperson who is a former member of United Russia and not a member of the CPRF. The hope was that a fresh face with moderate views would do better to attract a broader base of voters. The party's platform focuses on improving labour conditions, progressive taxation, social welfare schemes and economic sovereignty, and includes measures such as Russia exiting the World Trade Organisation.<sup>4</sup> A vocal faction with a well-established history and party apparatus, it has been attracting new members.<sup>5</sup> They have consistently placed second in every presidential election since

1996. In the same year, Zyuganov came close to defeating the incumbent president, Boris Yeltsin, forcing the elections into a run-off. They have also been the largest faction in the State Duma in 1995 and 1999. Zyuganov has been the opposition leader in several cabinets. Grudinin received almost 12 percent of the vote share in the 2018 elections.

The Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, the third-largest faction with 39 seats, was founded in 1991. In the erstwhile Soviet Union, it was the second officially recognised party. The party is opposed to both neoliberal capitalism and communism, and its platform can be described as chauvinist and revanchist, supporting the restoration of a 'greater Russia'. It espouses anti-Western attitudes with a belief in a strong state role in domestic affairs. In the 1993 State Duma elections, the party received a plurality of votes. Its leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, 71, has been a fixture of the presidential elections, contesting every single election except the one in 2004. In the 2018 elections, he placed third behind Pavel Grudinin.

The fourth-largest party in the Duma with 23 seats is "A Just Russia." As a social-democratic party, it supports a welfare state, improved labour legislation and individual property rights, and a market economy with progressive taxation. It was formed in 2006 after the merger of parties with similar ideologies. While they supported Dmitry Medvedev for the post of president in 2008, they fielded the party head Sergey Mironov in 2012. In the latest 2018 elections, they supported the candidacy of Vladimir Putin.

The smallest parties in the Duma with one seat each are Rodina<sup>6</sup> and Civic Platform.

Rodina, a conservative nationalist party, was formed in 2003 and is headed by Aleksey Zhuravlyov. It supports a strong state role in economy, improved labour rights, administrative services and Russia's improved standing in a multipolar world. Civic Platform is a young party, formed in 2012 after the party registration process was eased. It was formed by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov after he placed third in the 2012 presidential elections. Pro-business and pro-industry, it considers improving the sectors of education, culture and healthcare critical for the country's development. Its current leader is Rifat Shaykhtudinov. Both parties supported President Putin's candidacy in 2018.

Some opposition parties have a long history and others are fairly new. However, their influence on the political process has been marginal owing to the majorities held by United Russia in successive convocations of the Duma. The current opposition has often been labelled as a "rubber stamp opposition," or "pro-regime."<sup>7</sup> Most of them have consolidated their bases of support, but their numbers remain small. Even if they coordinate their actions in the Duma, United Russia's present majority virtually guarantees the passage of any of its measures. Their nominal ideological differences make a merger difficult, but some similarities do emerge, especially around Russia's role in world affairs and the importance of its sovereignty. Most parties believe in similar domestic agendas, especially when it comes to spending on social-welfare schemes and boosting educational and healthcare facilities. Some, like A Just Russia, also believe in greater market liberalisation and have supported modernisation programmes in the past.

## NON-DUMA POLITICAL PARTIES

Parties without seats in the Duma, too, fielded candidates for the 2018 elections. Grigory Yavlinsky, the founder of the liberal party Yabloko, ran as its candidate. Formed in the 1990s, its platform advocates for greater civil liberties, improved rule of law, increased spending in the social sector and stronger anti-corruption policies. It is a proponent of the European model of development and seeks better relations with the West.<sup>8</sup> Yavlinsky's 2018 run marked his third time as a presidential candidate.

The Party of Growth is another pro-business party. It favours reduced regulations, increased privatisation and industrialisation, a reduced reliance on commodity rents, a 'reset' of Russia's foreign relations, and a stronger middle class.<sup>9</sup> Its leader and candidate, Boris Titov, is a businessperson and the current presidential commissioner for entrepreneurs' rights. There is the Russian All-Peoples' Union, headed by Sergey Baburin. He also served as the party's presidential candidate. It is a conservative and nationalist party and supports Russia's improved standing in the world (particularly in the Eurasian region), stricter border controls and the revival of cultural values. Baburin is a former State Duma deputy. This was the first time he ran for the presidency. Communists of Russia, another communist party, also participated in the elections. At the helm of the party was its 39-year-old presidential candidate Maxim Suraykin. It was formed in direct opposition to the CPRF, based on the belief that the party was no longer truly communist, having capitulated to 'oligarchs'.<sup>10</sup>



The final candidate who ran for the presidency was Ksenia Sobchak from the party Civic Initiative. She is the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, former mayor of St. Petersburg, under whom Vladimir Putin worked as the head of the St. Petersburg Committee for External Relations. Her campaign ran on a liberal platform of free markets and privatisation, improved political rights and labour legislation.<sup>11</sup> She positioned herself as a protest candidate; her campaign slogan was “Against All.” As part of her campaign, she visited the United States, where she engaged in dialogue with think tanks on the current Russian political scenario. She has also been vocal about traditionally sensitive issues such as the problems in Chechnya. She announced the formation of a new party named “For Change,” days before the elections.<sup>12</sup> She placed fourth in the 2018 elections with around two percent of the vote share.

Other longstanding parties, such as the liberal Peoples’ Freedom Party (PARNAS), chose to support existing candidates such as Sobchak and Yavlinsky. PARNAS took this decision following a failed attempt at forming a coalition with the parties themselves.<sup>13</sup> The party traces its roots to a faction of the “Democratic Platform” within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The faction formed its own party called the Republican Party of the Russian Federation and renamed it the Republican Party of Russia (RPR) in 1990. Its platform is based on the protection of human rights and individual liberties, and economic liberalisation. Its present incarnation is a result of the merger between what became the Republican Party of Russia and a coalition of other liberal parties named PARNAS.

As with the Duma parties, some of these parties have a history while others are newcomers. For instance, Yabloko was represented in the State Duma from 1993 to 2007. However, it failed to gain any seats in the three parliamentary elections since. Other parties are niche with small support bases and have so far been unable to cross the five percent threshold to enter the Duma, limiting their ability to advocate their policy proposals. As it stands, they—at the very least—represent the existence of different strains of thought in the political process. However, it remains to be seen if they find more success in the 2021 Duma elections.

## THE NON-SYSTEMIC OPPOSITION

The other branch of the opposition, which is outside the formal party system, has conventionally been referred to as the “non-systemic opposition.” This includes figures such as former chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov and prominent anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny.

Many opposition figures played a role during the protests in Russia that began in 2011.<sup>14</sup> These protests began spontaneously in response to evidence of electoral fraud in the 2011 State Duma elections.<sup>15</sup> Some participants also joined the protests to express their disapproval of then prime minister Putin, who had announced his bid for the presidency.<sup>16</sup> They were significant in their scale, demands and relative success, particularly as they arose in the context of the Arab Spring. They saw tens of thousands of people marching in cities, mostly Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in smaller gatherings across the country, demanding “free and fair

elections.”<sup>17</sup> People were moved to action and began volunteering as election observers.<sup>18</sup>

The difficulty of sustaining large-scale protests across the country eventually led to a decline in protest activities. This was not a surprise as the overall potential for protests among the public in 2011 was not very high to begin with.<sup>19</sup> Even in Moscow, a relatively liberal city with a population of 12 million, estimates ranged from 30,000 to 120,000 protesters.<sup>20, 21</sup> (Compare this to Seoul—a city of 10 million—where over 1.5 million people took to the streets to protest against the South Korean president in 2016–17.)<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the intention of the protests was to achieve “free elections, not revolution.”<sup>23</sup> The government, too, had capitulated to some demands, including a relaxation in the rules regarding the registration of political parties, and began installing closed-circuit cameras in over 90,000 polling booths.<sup>24</sup>

As such, in the initial stages, the demands of the mobilised public and opposition groups were largely aligned.<sup>25</sup> As the protests continued, their demands began to diverge from the interests of the larger public and developed an overt anti-government stance. The various opposition groups involved in these protests were united primarily in their disapproval of the current government but differed in terms of ideologies and strategies for reforms. The ‘March of Millions’ in May 2012, which coincided with the president’s inauguration, triggered crackdowns by authorities.<sup>26</sup> Many opposition figures, including the far-left Sergei Udaltsov, were arrested and sent to prison. Since then, large-scale demonstrations have included rallies against the war in Ukraine as well as pro-

Crimea rallies, and marches against government corruption.

The prevailing public sentiment during 2011–12 helped opposition leaders gain political mileage. Though they differed in their initial levels of influence, many gained a higher profile through their participation in the demonstrations. At the time of the protests, prominent leaders included former government officials such as the late Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov, now leader of PARNAS, and Duma deputies Ilya Ponamarev and Dmitry Gudkov. After the protests subsided, some leaders such as Ksenia Sobchak transitioned from activism to politics. As did Ilya Yashin, founding member of the liberal-democratic movement Solidarnost, who announced his bid for Moscow mayor in 2018.<sup>27</sup> Others such as prominent anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny mobilised significant groups of supporters around them and continue working outside formal party structures. Navalny was virtually unknown before the protests.<sup>28</sup> Although he was elected leader of the Progress Party in 2013, he has been unable to get it registered.<sup>29</sup> The party is opposed to excessive state control and favours decentralisation in politics and the economy as well as a shift to a parliamentary system. He was barred from the 2018 elections due to a conviction over charges of embezzlement. Navalny is also known for his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), which he founded in 2012. His investigations into corruption, featured on his blog and YouTube channels, have increased his profile both within and outside Russia. He placed second in the 2013 Moscow mayoral elections, running as a candidate of RPR-PARNAS.

Nationalists, too, feature in the mix of opposition groups, though they are perhaps better classified as ‘ultra-nationalists’.<sup>30</sup> They have, at times, joined ideologically diverse coalitions that are critical of the government.<sup>31</sup> An unregistered party—Other Russia—was formed in an attempt to consolidate this bloc.<sup>32</sup> The authorities are reluctant to register nationalist groups as official parties, mindful of the effects ethnic nationalists have in a multi-ethnic country and because of a general aversion to extremist rhetoric, given the country’s history. There are, however, several informal groupings and annual rallies. The most prominent of these is the annual Russian March, held on 4 November, Russia’s National Day of Unity.<sup>33</sup> Alexei Navalny has attended some of these marches and has also expressed anti-immigrant views.<sup>34</sup> Authorities crack down on many such marches, which at times feature neo-Nazis, citing Article 282 of the Criminal Code, an anti-extremism law.<sup>35</sup> This has, in part, led some nationalist groups to oppose the government. Others believe that the current government is too accepting of the West and of liberal ideas. However, under the current government, these groups are at the fringes.

Following the protests, attempts were made to unify the opposition. An ‘opposition Coordination Council’ was formed in 2012 to coordinate protest actions across the country. Online elections were held to elect the 45 council members. Around 80,000 verified voters participated. Figures such as Navalny, Sobchak and Nemtsov were elected. The council disbanded itself in 2013. Various opposition groups have continued their work even amidst public distrust and a reduced appetite for protests. Some coalitions, such as the United Democrats, have been formed and

have achieved some success in local elections.<sup>36</sup> However, widespread support for many opposition figures has generally been lacking.<sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> For the 2018 presidential elections, there was very little coordination among supporters of different candidates. However, while the number of people willing to come out onto the streets has reduced, feelings of dissatisfaction remain. Political protests continue, including unsanctioned ones, such as those that took place during the run-up to the 2018 election and the president’s inauguration in May.<sup>39, 40</sup> The number of smaller-scale protests regarding local, social and economic issues, such as the non-payment of salaries or urban development in Moscow, seems to have increased.<sup>41, 42, 43</sup> As is the case in many countries, the non-systemic opposition serves mainly an expressive function, but there is an overly hostile relationship between non-systemic groups and the government, and a lack of communication between systemic and non-systemic opposition groups that reduces their efficacy.

## CHALLENGES

The collective opposition faces both internal conflicts and external obstacles. Established political parties and opposition activists face different problems in their dealings with the public.

Parties in the Duma are fragmented, spanning the ideological spectrum from communists to nationalists and liberals. No one party holds a mandate large enough to challenge the party in power. The opposition vote is split among five parties and coming together has proven to be difficult. opposition party delegates do hold chairmanships of

various Duma committees, and various factions have opposed bills proposed by the government. However, the ruling party's present majority means these gestures are effectively symbolic. The CPRF has, at times, demanded action against alleged corruption at the top levels of government through statements in the Duma, and several parties have mentioned curbing corruption as a key plank in their platforms.

Parties also receive funds from the state based on their electoral performance, in addition to any private donations. Parties and candidates that gain at least three percent of the vote in either election are eligible to receive these funds, which are proportionate to their vote share. While helpful for smaller parties, the distribution of funds also widens the gap between larger and smaller parties in the Duma, and between Duma and non-Duma parties. United Russia's funding in 2016 crossed RUB 8 billion, and the CPRF followed with RUB 2 billion.<sup>44</sup> The smallest parties in the Duma, Civic Platform and Rodina, had less than RUB 100 million each.<sup>45</sup> PARNAS, despite its pedigree, has no funding from businesses, whereas the LDPR and CPRF do.<sup>46</sup> It is unclear whether their lack of funds is due to their poor prospects, or whether their poor prospects have to do with a lack of funds.

As for non-systemic groups, their strategy remains ambiguous: they are activists as well as aspiring politicians. The clearest avenue for them to advocate their policies is through the formal system. 'Systemic' groups have this advantage already. However, building a coalition among the public in support of a concrete agenda rather than in opposition to the government is their first challenge.

Expanding this to groups outside the ones predisposed to them is another. In demanding comparatively more abstract political rights, they are unable to garner much public support but are able to bring people on to the streets. However, the broader public is primarily concerned with pensions, incomes, inflation, healthcare and education, and sees elections as a way to express this. According to a survey by the Carnegie Moscow Centre and the Levada-Centre on Russians' attitudes towards change, a plurality of people believed that voting for reform candidates was the most effective way to enact change.<sup>47</sup> Even a 2011 survey of Muscovites betrayed a lack of faith in opposition figures due to their lack of tangible achievements, divergent interests from those of ordinary people, excessive 'negativity', and the suspicion of the influence of the West.<sup>48, 49</sup>

This does not mean they do not face external challenges. Perhaps, most importantly, they struggle with finances. Groups like the FBK are run on small donations and crowdfunding. Olga Romanova, a journalist and treasurer of the opposition Coordination Council, left the group citing frustrations over collecting money.<sup>50</sup> Businesses and donors are reluctant to fund opposition groups. Opposition groups have also struggled to register their parties.<sup>51</sup>

Media access and messaging is another issue. During the election campaign, opposition candidates naturally struggled with media coverage compared to the incumbent. Debates between the candidates were held in the run-up to the election, but President Putin did not participate. The three largest national television channels—Channel One, Russia-1 and NTV—are owned by the



state or by state-owned companies. According to the Levada-Centre, in 2013, 88 percent of Russians received their news from televisions, down from 94 percent in 2009.<sup>52</sup> Although independent news sources such as online publications and shows are gaining traction, their reach is not as wide. Independent publications struggle with low readership. Navalny has been able to overcome this through the internet, but his reach still remains limited. Many critics of the government also point to the authorities' aggressive response towards these groups. Opposition activists are harassed, and their motives questioned.<sup>53, 54, 55</sup>

Although diverse in their viewpoints, both systemic and non-systemic opposition groups do have some commonalities, the foremost being their message of anti-corruption. Groups such as the FBK conduct investigations into corrupt activities by state officials. The dissemination of information through social media and the internet has led to a growing awareness about the scale of the issue among the public. However, there have been no clear attempts to coordinate with the leaders of larger and well-established parties, which would go some way in improving the credibility of non-systemic figures. The nature of the problem is such that there is the risk of co-optation by the government, as action against corruption must come from the state authorities. According to a Levada-Centre poll, the number of respondents who believed in President Putin's ability to fight corruption was quite high.<sup>56</sup> While pressure from the opposition has been successful at curbing corruption at a smaller scale, achieving large-scale reform is outside its abilities.

Supporters of people such as Navalny demonstrate that there is dissatisfaction among a considerable segment of the youth, many of whom have come of age during President Putin's tenure. Sizeable numbers are still willing to attend even unsanctioned demonstrations, although not yet at the scale of the 2011 protests. The public has so far not rallied behind one particular opposition figure, mainly because there isn't a unifying figure to represent the different concerns expressed in contemporary Russian society. Despite being disappointed with the status quo, people struggle to identify one particular reformer. As per the Carnegie-Levada survey, a quarter of respondents identified Vladimir Putin as someone who could present an appealing plan for reform, although the top answer was "no one," followed by "not sure."<sup>57</sup> Others named established and senior politicians. The public believes the objectives of reform should be to improve living standards and to achieve greater economic development. Only seven percent mentioned anti-corruption measures. Fifty percent thought improving medical services should be the state's priority, followed by reducing inflation and improving education, agriculture and housing facilities. Only eight percent considered free and fair elections to be a priority.<sup>58</sup> It is difficult to see how the opposition will achieve these changes while remaining outside the power structure, as has been the case so far. Their chances might improve in the coming years, but as of now, the perception of security and stability provided by a strong, centralised state has been vital.

## PROSPECTS

The present situation of the opposition in a country whose political system is still

developing and does not follow the ‘Western’ liberal-democratic model is fraught. The opposition’s role is circumscribed in a state with two guiding ideas, namely stability and sovereignty. This means that groups that challenge status quo face an inherent disadvantage, both in terms of their relation to the state and the public. At present, their effectiveness is tempered by their relationship to the elite: parties cannot stay in power without making some concessions, lest they be relegated outside the power structure. A Levada-Centre survey on the necessity of an opposition found that 54 percent of respondents thought Russia needed one, while 25 percent thought it did not. The latter group’s reasons included the divisiveness brought about in society, the need for a ‘strong hand’ to solve problems, and their hampering of the president’s efforts.<sup>59</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, followed by the attempt to implement liberal economic reforms, the 1998 debt default and financial crisis meant that the 1990s were a time of upheaval. President Putin’s nomination to the post and his subsequent term brought with it a sense of renewed order and stability and decisive leadership. He oversaw an economy in recovery, buoyed by rising oil prices, where incomes nearly doubled from 1999 to 2006.<sup>60</sup> The upheavals in Ukraine and the Arab Spring countries were major considerations for both the state and its people, with regard to how they view opposition movements and groups. The fear of Western attempts at toppling the regime cast doubt on these groups’ activities. A strong state and elite control over political processes, therefore, leaves little room for uncertainty about who will come to power. The current

chill in relations with the West, the belief in the West’s ‘Russophobia’ and the amplification of this message in the domestic sphere has increased the desire for a stable and decisive regime.

Russia’s leaders still derive their legitimacy from popular support. In the words of political theorist Yascha Mounk, there still remains a belief in “channelling the popular will.”<sup>61</sup> The public can also take pride in their country’s decisive and relatively prompt actions in the international sphere.<sup>62</sup> However, this has often meant that individuals and journalists, especially those investigating particularly sensitive topics, have been targeted. The 2011 protests demonstrated a willingness of large and diverse group of people to come out on to the streets for political purposes. However, barring a national-level inciting incident, they are unlikely to repeat themselves.

Russia’s conception of state sovereignty is also key. It is evident in the platforms of various political parties that Russia’s status as a ‘great power’ is not up for debate. Some groups have called for improved relations with the West, but on its own terms as a major pole in the international order and not as a subordinate or regional power. It rejects the dominance of the current “liberal international order,” believing that this system, with one primary guarantor of its stability, is largely destructive, promoting only the interests of the West. Since this belief includes the imposition of liberal democracy, it can be applied to its domestic sphere as well. The phrase “sovereign democracy” has been used to describe Russia’s political system, first mentioned in 2006 by Vladislav Surkov, who is now an adviser to the president.<sup>63</sup> There are doubts about the definition of the term or its

utility, but it broadly indicates an attempt to control the narrative of the institution of democracy in the country, resisting efforts to judge its implementation or efficacy.<sup>64</sup> Another survey by the Levada-Centre showed a more detailed picture. A plurality of respondents wanted a system that was democratic—with a market economy and respect for human rights—but adapted to the Russian ‘way of life’.<sup>65</sup> The share of respondents who were indifferent as long as their material situation was adequate and those who wanted an entirely unique system of politics and development was roughly the same.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, these are not ideas or feelings that are unique to the Russian populace. They reflect a broad sense of a government that exists for the service of its people, and as has been demonstrated, people are willing to hold the authorities accountable, especially at local levels. Russia has been under the same leader for the last 18 years. How this long-lasting regime has affected peoples’ attitude towards their system of governance is unclear, but there is definitely a scope for change in peoples’ beliefs.


The opposition has already turned its attention towards future elections. Coalitions of parties have shown some success at local elections.<sup>67</sup> While the next presidential elections are undoubtedly important, no one figure has emerged as an alternative to President Putin. It is likely that next president will be an insider of the incumbent party, but the 2021 Duma elections will be decisive. There is a growing disconnect between the United Russia government and the office of the president. Approval ratings of the government were at 47, those of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev were at 42 percent,

while President Putin’s ratings still remain around 80 percent.<sup>68</sup> If the level of grassroots coalition-building continues, the chances for opposition parties might improve. A greater role in the national political process for non-systemic groups, however, will be difficult without reconciliation with those in power.

The domestic affairs in India’s ‘time-tested’ partner have implications at home as well. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Indo-Russia relations have primarily developed under President Putin. A change in leadership may lead to a change in the parameters of the partnership. Expanding Indo-Russian contacts outside official channels will help ensure that the relationship is not taken for granted, particularly as China becomes a more enticing partner for both countries. Improved media coverage and people-to-people exchanges will help this process. Anti-corruption efforts by parties and activists in Russia will benefit both the countries and help increase Russia’s attractiveness as an investment destination. Even if the next president, owing to the need for continuity and stability, is unlikely to be from the opposition, the 2021 Duma elections could mean that certain opposition parties might have a greater say in the decision-making process. A better understanding of the drivers of Russian domestic policies can help India to better handle its relationship with its partner.

Russia has entered a period of transition, the results of which will become known in six years. This will undoubtedly have implications for global security, whether positive or negative. Increasing insecurity in the domestic sphere can lead to increased risk-taking in the

international sphere, or perhaps another ‘reset’ with the West. As for the incumbent president, there are two alternatives: either he steps down, or he continues in his role. The former option will require a new source of legitimacy for any potential successor to ensure a smooth transition, possibly through stronger and more accountable institutions. The latter may become more appealing if Russia’s relations with the United States and Europe continue to deteriorate. It is also possible President Putin continues in some other official capacity. Russia can continue on its current course as long as oil prices are stable, but the key

concerns of citizens must be prioritised. Perhaps the president’s renewed mandate will be the key to ensuring that certain reforms are made. Though proposals have been introduced by Sergei Glazyev, adviser to the president, and Alexei Kudrin, former minister of finance, these are yet to be realised. Some believe the new mandate is for stability rather than change, and that economic reforms will be difficult without relaxing the state’s hold on the public sphere.<sup>69,70</sup> What is clear is that the coming presidential term will be critical in determining Russia’s future political and economic direction. 

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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