

# Russia's Authoritarian Placebo

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The Duma elections scheduled for September 18–20 are less a democratic exercise than an indirect indicator of the direction in which the Russian authoritarian regime is heading. The results of this quasi-electoral process will make it possible to assess how effectively the Kremlin can maintain a veneer of stability amidst mounting losses on the front lines, internal elite infighting over the seizure of assets, and a social contract that—since 2000—has been redefined three times and gradually stripped of any substance that might positively impact the lives of ordinary citizens. These dynamics will also shape Russia's foreign policy, particularly regarding the pace and scope of hostile actions against its Western neighbours. Indeed, Russia's political-economic system—reliant on stoking external conflicts to preserve internal cohesion, while burdened by corruption and a lack of public-sphere pluralism—is bracing for a new wave of mobilization and further escalation, even as it approaches the limits of maintaining stability through repression alone.

## Barometer of Fracture

Every modern political system requires a narrative to justify its existence. In Russia, this narrative has shifted at least three times over the past quarter-century, reflecting the transition from oligarchic democracy to full-blown authoritarianism. Initially, it was framed as a trade-off: exchanging political freedom—equated with chaos—for stability and a rising standard of living. Later, it shifted to a civilizational mission rooted in Orthodoxy and traditional values. Finally, it evolved into the overt exercise of control over most spheres of social life, initially under the guise of public health and subsequently in the name of national security.

Each successive shift was intended to mask the widening gap between the Kremlin's promises and its actual capabilities. The oil boom that financed the original arrangement ended with the 2008 crisis. The imperial euphoria surrounding the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas gave way to a war that failed to achieve any of its stated objectives. Meanwhile, tools once reserved for emergencies—such as shutting down media outlets, electoral engineering, and surveillance infrastructure—became permanent fixtures of governance.

This text analyses this evolution through the lens of four issues: (1) the ideological restructuring of the social contract itself; (2) the consolidation of an elite that openly runs the state like a clan-based business enterprise; (3) the upcoming elections as a barometer of the system's resilience to further strain before visible cracks appear; (4) the potential impact of the elections on the direction of Russia's foreign policy, which is of particular importance for the security of NATO and EU member states.

# Placebo for Sterility

When Vladimir Putin took power from Boris Yeltsin, he—as a representative of the emerging oligarchic order—struck an unspoken pact with society. In exchange for passive or active support for the construction of a façade democracy (later euphemistically termed "sovereign democracy"), the Kremlin elite promised to tackle the major systemic ills widely associated with the "wretched nineties" (Russian: *likhye devanostye*): low and irregularly paid wages and social benefits, the abysmal state of public services, goods shortages, and rampant organized crime.

This arrangement held firm as long as global energy prices remained high. While Russia's average annual GDP per capita growth rate was -3.5% between 1991 and 2000, it rose to 5.2% in the following decade (according to World Bank data). The Kremlin owed these results primarily to oil and gas sales to Western nations. The West turned a blind eye to Russia's mounting systemic flaws, clinging tenaciously to the illusion of the "end of history"—the conviction that neoliberalism would ultimately face no obstacles to its expansion, driven solely by its own momentum and the global development of capital markets.

The crisis of 2008–2009 put an end to this arrangement. Consequently, in late 2011—as Putin sought the presidency again following Dmitry Medvedev's interlude—he was compelled by unfolding events to adjust his rhetoric. Russia, envisioned as a civilization setting the tone for spiritual development across millions of square kilometres of Eurasia, was to distinguish itself from its neighbours through the moral values fostered by Orthodoxy and the unifying role of the Russian language. Authentically traditional values were expected to secure its advantage over the West, which had lost its way in the pursuit of material wealth. After years of humiliation and vacillation, Russia was to consolidate and gather its strength to claim a dignified place on the world map.

This consolidation would have proven insufficient had it not gone beyond mere rhetoric. The annexation of Crimea, the kinetic war in the Donbas, and a hybrid war waged on a global scale provided the Russian elites with the time and tools to boost public support for Putin to the 80–90% range and to justify the elimination of the last vestiges of media pluralism and non-systemic opposition. Initiatives such as the "national projects"—promising multi-billion investments in healthcare, education, and technological advancement—served merely as a pretext for institutionalizing corruption-derived rents and further consolidating the narrow elite that benefited from them.

Even this modified version of the original social contract proved unsustainable. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kremlin tightened the authoritarian screws even further under the guise of sanitary restrictions. The years 2020 and 2021 saw the elimination of the last remnants of genuine opposition. Since then, new

tools for maintaining the system have been tested, such as tighter control over the Russian segment of the internet (Runet), restrictions on foreign streaming platforms, and the aggressive promotion of the "Max" application. The latter is modelled on the Chinese approach of aggregating public services and online citizen activity into a unified, easily monitored ecosystem.

These measures appear to be yielding results in the form of growing passivity among the Russian population. Abuses—such as coercing officials and teachers to go to the polls, manipulating electronic voting (now spanning 33 regions, compared to 7 in 2021 [1]), and allowing the same individuals to visit multiple polling stations—seem to matter less and less to the public.

The Duma elections, scheduled for September 20, will thus mark another stage in the hollowing out of the system that has taken shape in Russia over the past quarter-century. Its foundations must be reinforced through increasingly crude methods that turn the electoral process into a farce, aiming for maximum regime support alongside record-high turnout. The latter is crucial, as it is intended to demonstrate that citizens wish to make their voices heard. At the same time, it reveals that the election campaign and the vote itself serve as a placebo for the pervasive fatigue and the lack of prospects for a significant, rapid change of course for the better across the country. This dynamic will likely be reflected in foreign policy as well—most notably in an even more aggressive Russian stance toward its EU and NATO neighbours.

## Greedy Darwinism of the Elites

However, the election result may offer indirect clues as to the direction in which the Russian elite is heading—an elite increasingly riven by infighting and impatient in the struggle for dwindling assets. Viewed from the onset of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny triggered a distinct reconfiguration of the balance of power across various arenas where leading Russian oligarchs and state officials vied for wealth. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu survived, but not for long. For months, Prigozhin had publicly accused Shoigu and General Valery Gerasimov of corruption and incompetence in the conduct of the war. Although Prigozhin himself died in a plane crash in August 2023, the accusations he levelled remained in the public consciousness. Shoigu was dismissed in May 2024, becoming the only representative of major power factions to actually lose his position in recent years. His downfall was hastened by, among other things, a conflict with Sergei Chemezov—head of the Rostec conglomerate—who had criticized Shoigu regarding the quantity and quality of military equipment supplied to the front by the corporation [2].

The confiscated assets of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group were largely transferred to the state property management agency, Rosimushchestvo, or to major

conglomerates: Rostec (Sergei Chemezov), Rosatom (the Kovalchuk brothers), Rosneft (Igor Sechin), and Rosselkhozbank (Dmitry Patrushev). Some assets were sold off at below-market prices to individuals within Putin's inner circle, such as Arkady Rotenberg and Yuri Kovalchuk. This process coincided, in part, with the enrichment of Putin's relatives and in-laws. He appointed at least 24 of them to high-ranking government posts or entrusted them with the management of lucrative enterprises [3]. This figure—sometimes estimated as high as 26 individuals—is the result of painstaking investigations involving the tracing of corporate and asset links (including real estate) across numerous Western nations [4].

There are also examples of a broader generational shift unfolding before our eyes within the Russian political and economic system. In May 2024, Dmitry Patrushev—son of Nikolai Patrushev, the former FSB chief and Security Council Secretary—joined the federal government as a Deputy Prime Minister. He quickly began building his own faction, leveraging his father's connections to consolidate the Patrushev family's position. Meanwhile, the Fradkov brothers appear to be active in both public administration and the business sector. While Pavel assumed the role of Deputy Minister of Defence following a major shake-up after Sergei Shoigu's dismissal, Pyotr heads Promsvyazbank, an institution that has been aggressively acquiring smaller Russian banks since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine [5].

Although the Duma has long ceased to play a significant role in Russia's policy-making and decision-making processes, its composition still offers some insight into the fragile balance between clans, factions, and other interest groups. An analysis of the results can shed light on potential fault lines, ongoing disputes, and reshuffles at the very heart of the Russian power structure. At the same time, the failure to achieve key war objectives against Ukraine—such as eliminating the Ukrainian president and government, seizing four of the country's southern and eastern regions, or deterring the West from providing substantial support to Kyiv—means that internal friction could translate into adjustments in the direction of both domestic and foreign policy.

## Composition of the Duma and the Direction of Russian Authoritarianism

Recent months have brought events that the Kremlin appears to view as sources—whether actual or potential—of uncertainty. Ukrainian strikes on targets far from the front line have brought the war closer to Russian citizens. While the prevailing attitude among the general public seemed to be one of denial rather than ignorance, this strategy is becoming untenable in the face of burning Wildberries logistics centres, oil refineries, and other facilities—stretching from St. Petersburg to the Urals.

Another factor whose impact on Russia's domestic situation cannot be downplayed is the scale and geographical distribution of casualties suffered in the war with Ukraine. The most conservative estimates, compiled by Mediazona and the BBC's Russian service, place the number of soldiers lost between 249,000 (cases with confirmed identities as of September 11, 2026) and 352,000 (based on court probate cases as of December 31, 2025 [6]). Journalists involved in the project acknowledge that the actual figure could be twice as high. These losses disproportionately affect regions with large non-ethnic Russian populations—such as Bashkortostan—as well as rural and economically underdeveloped areas. This could foster a greater willingness to protest in ways still available to ordinary citizens, thereby influencing voter turnout and actual support for the United Russia party. Although federal authorities might manage both of these issues through administrative measures and electoral fraud, the scale of irregularities could cause such actions to backfire. This is particularly significant given the prospect of a new wave of conscription, which would likely affect the provinces far more heavily than major urban centres. Should the unfavourable situation at the front persist and the Kremlin decide to amass additional resources for another major offensive—partly to demonstrate resolve to the US administration and gain leverage in ongoing talks—mobilization could become a reality for tens or hundreds of thousands of men as early as this autumn.

The Kremlin must therefore devise new tools to sustain the system without undermining its foundations. The upcoming Duma elections will serve as a key indicator of the direction this process is taking. In the 2021 vote, United Russia lost 19 seats, though it managed to retain a constitutional majority. The primary beneficiaries of these shifts were the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and a new party representing the so-called "systemic opposition"—New People. Federal authorities were unable to fully counter nationwide protests against them while adhering to established rules. This time, the level of support for United Russia—and the determination to secure it—will reveal the extent of the measures Russia's ruling elites are prepared to take to ensure their survival.

Another indirect indicator of internal shifts within the political regime will be the composition of the Duma. In the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, new—or rather, far more prominent and empowered—actors have emerged on the political stage: the so-called "Z-patriots." These include military bloggers, online content creators, and war veterans who maintain strong ties to troops at the front and hold ultranationalist, chauvinistic views. While they support the war, many express dissatisfaction with the methods used to subjugate Ukraine, regarding the Kremlin's approach as too lenient and insufficiently confrontational toward the West.

The entry of these individuals into the Duma might temporarily help defuse this tension, but it could also provide them with a new tool to promote their own agenda—in a manner that seemed highly improbable even a decade ago (following the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas). After all, Putin and his

inner circle have repeatedly declared that representatives of this milieu would become the nation's new elites. Over a thousand war veterans have already assumed positions within the state apparatus. Of the more than 1,600 veterans appearing on federal, regional, and local election ballots, 200 are vying for seats in the 450-member Duma (including 110 on federal lists). However, only 52 are running as United Russia candidates [7]. For a party aiming to retain a constitutional majority, these figures appear modest.

The issue of the war against Ukraine is also significant because support for it has proven to be a *\*sine qua non\** for participating in the elections. The Yabloko party did not fall in line with this approach; consequently, it was barred from running on the grounds of accepting foreign funding, copyright infringement, and supporting the "LGBT movement"—which the Supreme Court designated an extremist organization in late 2023 [8].

It appears that Yabloko has fallen victim to the "Nadezhdin effect." Boris Nadezhdin—who appeared in state media, acting as a "punching bag" and voicing views contrary to the Kremlin line—was seen by many Russians as the sole protest candidate in the 2024 presidential election. His popularity surged to such an extent that he was ultimately barred from running. Yabloko now also faces the threat of being outlawed, as it may fail to meet the requirements necessary to operate as a nationwide political party.

## The Foreign Dimension

The trajectory of Russian authoritarianism relies heavily on overcoming chronic state weaknesses by shifting focus to foreign policy. The link between these actions and domestic crises is almost direct. In 2008, at the onset of a deep economic crisis that hit Russia harder than many Western nations, the intervention in Georgia yielded an easy victory. This enabled Putin to declare, at the turn of 2011 and 2012, that "Russia is gathering its strength" [9]. Three and a half years later—when it became clear to the Kremlin and the few analysts tracking Russian political and economic affairs that the country would not return to a path of rapid growth—the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas stoked imperial sentiment, diverting attention from the widening development gap separating Russia not only from the West but also from China.

This policy of escalation led to the events of February 2022 and the ongoing full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which once again employed the rhetoric of Russia as a "besieged fortress" merely defending itself against a threat. In this context, the question arises: where will Russia's current leadership draw the line they decide not to cross? Numerous provocations aimed at the Baltic states, Poland, and the Nordic countries; acts of sabotage in the Czech Republic, Germany, and elsewhere; and changes to nuclear doctrine—rendering it even more ambiguous—suggest that

prospects are, at the very least, uncertain. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that rivalry within the Russian elites increasingly resembles a zero-sum game. The process of wealth redistribution among competing clans—accelerated by the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny and the sidelining of Sergei Shoigu—has destroyed the remnants of an independent economic base operating outside the Kremlin-controlled patronage system. As war expenditures consume an ever-larger share of the budget, poverty is becoming a real challenge for millions of Russians, while for the ruling elites, seizing others' assets remains one of the few remaining sources of enrichment; the system's internal cohesion relies less on genuine loyalty and more on the promise of future spoils.

These conditions render the regime simultaneously more fragile and more dependent on external conflict to maintain equilibrium: shrinking domestic resources raise the stakes of any internal disputes, while the war abroad provides both a justification for further expropriations and a means to divert attention from their costs. Viewed in this light, international escalation is becoming increasingly necessary, driven by the very structure of the system.

## Conclusion

The upcoming Duma elections are a political-administrative ritual with a foregone conclusion. However, the context reveals the exhaustion of the ideological compact amidst structural nepotism and corruption-driven rent-seeking, all resting on dwindling resources. In short, this is a system more concerned with creating the illusion that problems do not exist—and shifting blame onto external factors—than with actually solving them.

At the same time, the state apparatus has focused almost entirely on suppressing two undeniable facts: mounting losses at the front and growing public discontent. Citizens are being asked to continue funding a war with no end in sight—a war that is wreaking havoc within Russia itself. So far, the Kremlin's response has been to rely even more heavily on the very mechanisms that created the current situation: tighter information control, feigned tolerance for "patriotic" voices demanding greater resolve in the war effort, and the elimination of the remaining opposition.

It remains an open question whether these steps signal the Kremlin's confidence or a shrinking margin for manoeuvre. While the Duma elections will not settle this definitively, they will reveal the extent of the elites' determination to maintain this "placebo effect" amidst increasingly aggressive authoritarianism. The previous elections serve as a benchmark here: in 2021, the United Russia party secured 324 seats with a turnout of 51.72%—meaning 19 fewer seats despite a turnout 3.84 percentage points higher than in 2016. Any result falling below these figures in this year's elections should be viewed as a failure for the federal authorities.

Although the outcome of this year's elections will not alter the general trajectory of Russian foreign policy, the suppression of anti-war dissent during the campaign indicates that the authorities have no intention of softening their stance or rhetoric regarding Ukraine and the conflict with the West. High official turnout and a large share of the vote for United Russia will be cited as evidence of public support for this confrontational course—a point Vladimir Putin signalled in his pre-election speech on September 16.

Developments in the final weeks leading up to the election suggest that adjustments to the system's functioning cannot be ruled out; such changes could impact the Kremlin's foreign policy in the short to medium term. This could manifest as an increase in provocations—such as the incident involving a Russian frigate and a Danish helicopter near Gedser—within the Baltic Sea region and along land borders with NATO states, including the testing of responses to "stray" drones or airspace violations.

A factor that cannot be overlooked is the tension within the Russian elite and the question of whether they are prepared to escalate these internal conflicts to the international stage. Actions such as sabotage or provocations against NATO forces could be instigated by specific oligarchic groups. Tacit approval for such activities might signal both the growing influence of particular factions and cliques and a progressive loss of control over them by the central power apparatus. Regardless of the reason, such phenomena should not be downplayed when analysing the course of events in a state that still possesses significant military potential and openly acknowledges the legacy of Soviet hybrid operations.

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