

ANOTHER RUBBER STAMP DUMA?

ANDREI KOLESNIKOV AND BORIS MAKARENKO | SEPTEMBER 2016

Even though the results of the September 18, 2016, Duma elections are easy enough to predict, the vote could still provide some surprises. Clearly, the Kremlin has little appetite for relaxing its wholesale control over Russia's political system. At the same time, there is a desire to portray the elections as largely fair, to help the regime to bolster its legitimacy among both elites and the broader body politic in the run-up to the 2018 presidential election campaign.

That said, the 2016 parliamentary campaign isn't just a test run for the 2018 presidential race. Rather, Russia's political regime—with its neo-corporatist tilt and penchant for personalized power—is in search of a governing model that will help it sustain the status quo for the foreseeable future. And the upcoming Duma and presidential election campaigns, for better or for worse, will help define the parameters for the post-2018 political cycle.

Over the past few years, the regime has overseen a distinct drop-off in the public's views on the legitimacy of both domestic political parties and parliamentary elections. By and large, broader Russian society doesn't believe that power can actually change hands via elections and has reacted indifferently to the numerous recent changes in election laws. Nonetheless, given the debilitated state of mass politics in Russia, restrictions on political competition, and the lack of tested mechanisms for the legal transfer of power, even a routine

legislative election like this might pose a test for the regime's legitimacy. Average Russians tend to view elections as both a ritual and a right.

From the Kremlin's standpoint, it's clear that the Kremlin has managed to mold Russian politics to fit both current realities and the regime's broader goals. In general, the state is moving away from the extremely strict forms of regulation on political life that it has employed in the past to a more flexible model of manipulation based on certain liberalization measures and sophisticated management tactics. Guaranteeing that the conduct of the elections will be greeted by Russian society and the elite as legitimate is the regime's best means of preventing massive protests, and lies at the core of the design of the new political system. And as of this summer, the regime had done everything in its power to achieve this main electoral objective and to ensure that a protest- and controversy-free election will lead to its preferred balance of power in the new Duma.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrei Kolesnikov is a senior associate and the chair of the Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center. He also works with the Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy and is a frequent contributor to *Vedomosti*, and *Gazeta.ru*.

Boris Makarenko is the chairman of the board at the Center for Political Technologies and a professor at the Higher School of Economics.

Two pro-regime opposition parties (known in popular parlance as the systemic opposition)—the Communists (the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, or KPRF) and A Just Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya)—as well as the Liberal Democrats (the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, or LDPR) will likely benefit from the losses expected by United Russia, the ruling party. These parties represent only token opposition to the regime. For the past several years, the so-called “angry urbanites,” who were the main force behind the 2011–2012 protests of the parliamentary and presidential election results, have failed to create a serious opposition movement or to channel their demands for greater liberalization into an effective vehicle for contesting the September elections.

Under the regime’s neo-corporatist political system, systemic opposition parties perform their role within strict, well-established boundaries. While these parties allow the public to vent some of its frustrations and provide the system with a useful degree of flexibility, they generally do little more than serve the regime’s long-term interests. In this context, switching one’s party affiliation changes almost nothing within the political system, as the ruling party will continue to maintain virtually total control over electoral politics.

That state of affairs suggests that the four current Duma parties—United Russia, KPRF, A Just Russia, and LDPR—will almost certainly win all 225 seats in the Duma awarded according to party list voting. The authors’ expectation is that the distribution of seats in the new Duma will not change significantly, helping perpetuate Russia’s current political regime and averting any serious damage to the regime’s legitimacy.

However, in all likelihood, the Duma elections will not improve the regime’s ability to cope with the long-term economic, social, and political challenges it faces. One of the most glaring issues, which the upcoming elections will not solve, is the Kremlin’s desire to pass along President Vladimir Putin’s legitimacy to any potential successor. According to the Russian constitution, Putin, who will most probably

stay in power after the 2018 election, will have to step down in 2024. That could make him something of a lame duck as soon as his next term starts.

As such, this hypothetical post-2018 reality will prompt a cautious rebalancing of the country’s political forces and the regime’s financial supporters, which may gradually destabilize the political consensus generated by the 2016 and 2018 elections. Likewise, it is conceivable that Russia’s increasingly unstable economic prospects may provoke additional demands from within the system and society at large for change—another challenge with which the regime is ill-prepared to deal.

A new wave of Putin’s appointments—such as several acting governors, the replacement of the Kremlin’s veteran chief of staff Sergei Ivanov with Anton Vaino, and Olga Vasilieva replacing Dmitry Livanov as minister of education—seem to have nothing to do with the forthcoming parliamentary elections. However, these events are all signs of preparation for the 2018 presidential election: the incumbent president is forming a new team, which will work during his next term. More broadly, these appointments constitute part of the process of forming new elites: they are more technocratic, but importantly, even more loyal than Putin’s current cronies. In this sense, the new Duma may become a venue for testing new faces in politics, a personnel reserve for the president.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS

Before projecting too far ahead, however, it’s worth evaluating the two main lines of argument that dominate most discussions of the upcoming Duma elections. According to the first, Putin’s approval rating may be high, but there are indications that the Crimea-inspired surge of patriotism is waning. As the level of support has stalled, the Kremlin has exhibited greater flexibility on managing the domestic political system and introduced some notable reforms. These changes will make the country’s political system somewhat more competitive, but not in a way that would pose a threat to United

Russia's dominance in the new Duma. The new class of Duma deputies might be more outspoken and more demanding, but they are not likely to have a more adversarial relationship with the Kremlin, due in no small part to the institution's inherent weaknesses. Therefore, the argument goes, observers should not expect many surprises in the upcoming elections.

The other line of argument is more backward-looking. The seemingly insignificant parliamentary elections in December 2011 triggered dramatic consequences in Moscow and beyond. The wave of public protests by angry urbanites shocked the political establishment and convinced it that it faced nothing less than an existential threat to the Putin regime. The Kremlin's response was sharp and swift, leading to greater political and legal restrictions, an embrace of traditional Russian values—a notion frequently preached by Kremlin propaganda, but barely explicated beyond very general terms such as family and patriotism—and, in due course, full-scale confrontation with the West over Ukraine.

All of these important changes to the political system are part and parcel of the ruling class's reaction to a series of irreversible challenges: the inadequacy of the Kremlin's policymaking, the lack of any vision for the future, and the absence of tested mechanisms for the transfer of power. Under these conditions, even the routine election of a weak legislature could pose a test for the regime's legitimacy. This, then, is what makes the upcoming elections so significant.

THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM BEFORE THE ELECTIONS

A short review of the Russian regime's most important characteristics can help provide some insight into the context—and the unknowns—of the upcoming Duma elections. First, the Kremlin has acquired the features of a neo-corporatist regime, melding the interests of state and business and seeking to implement a form of domestic bureaucratic authoritarianism. It bears a close resemblance to the Latin American political regimes of the 1970s that Guillermo O'Donnell studied.¹ These types of regimes are characterized by excessive regulation of electoral processes, with the leading, pro-regime

party staying on top and limiting other parties to strictly defined rules.

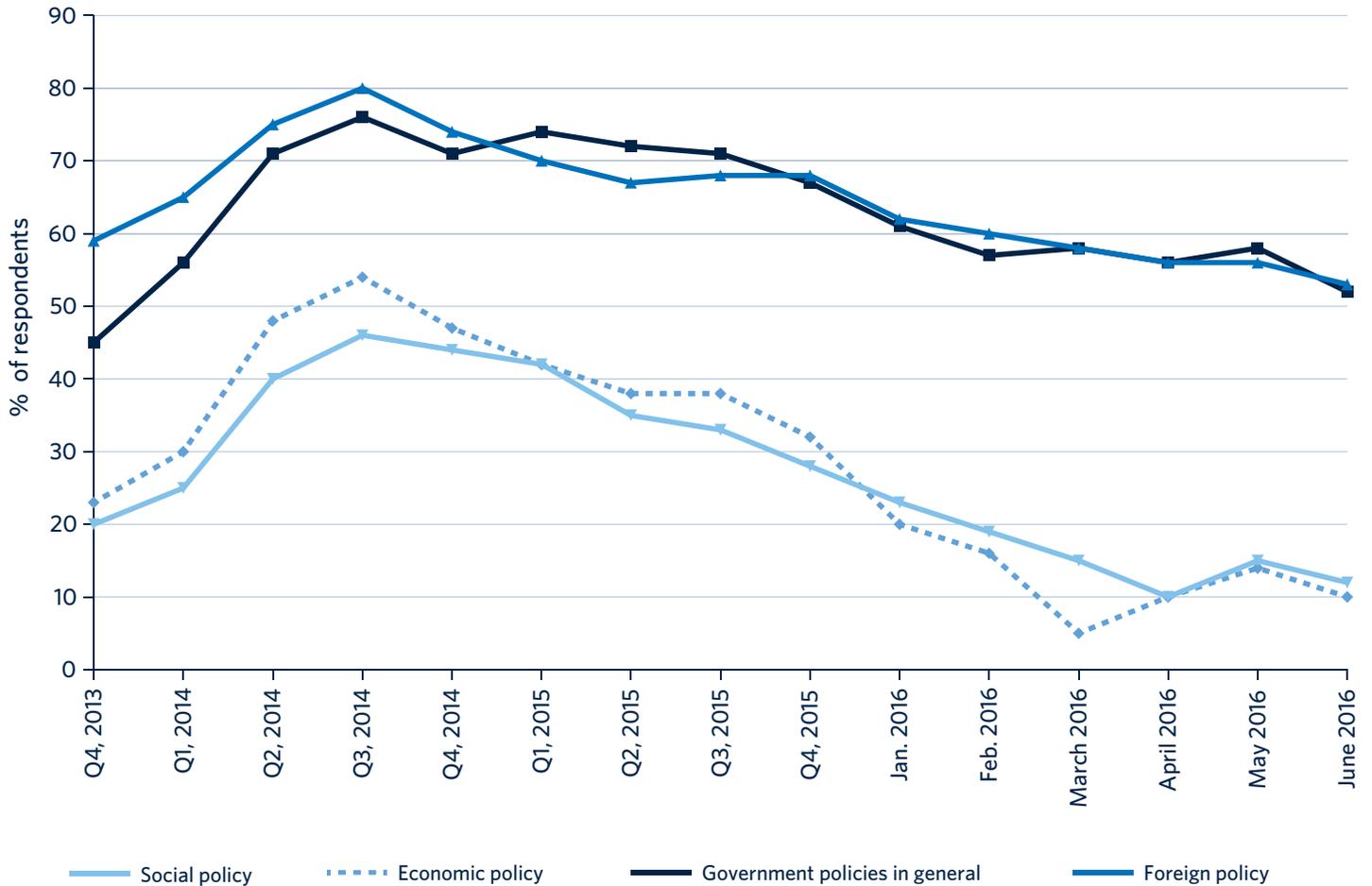
These types of regimes also keep civil society under tight control. Under this model, all elements of state- and societal-based structures must support the regime. The support is generated by trade unions, professional associations, gender-based organizations, and parliamentary political parties alike. All of them are, in reality, pro-government groups charged with ensuring that the electorate behaves itself and operates within a broader framework. Any interest groups licensed (or created) by the state are allowed a monopoly on their respective areas of work.² In the Russian case, such organizations include the All-Russia People's Front, the Civic Chamber, and consultative bodies under federal agencies.

Of course, there are additional parallels between the Kremlin and other types of modern hybrid, "competitive-authoritarian" regimes, as described by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way.³ However, the O'Donnell concept appears well-suited because of its close resemblance to Russia's excessively regulated electoral politics.

A second basic characteristic that may shed light on the upcoming Duma elections stems from Moscow's preference for personalized power. Since Putin came to power in 2000, his approval rating has almost always exceeded 60 percent (see figure 1). This rating jumped in September 2008, after the Georgian military campaign, rising above 80 percent. While the number sagged to 63 percent by 2011, it leaped by more than 20 points after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014.⁴

Aside from Putin's role as commander in chief and the overseer of foreign and domestic policy, for most Russians he is a unifying symbol and the guarantor of stability. By annexing Crimea, Putin capitalized on the foremost symbol of Russian imperial nostalgia and might. Sixteen years into his tenure, the degradation of Russia's nonpresidential political institutions means that the president has to be personally involved in many of the government's decisions,

Figure 1. Popular Approval Ratings for Russian Government Policies



Note: Each index constitutes the difference between the levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the government's overall, economic, social, and foreign policies.

Source: "Otsenka vlastey" [(Popular) appraisal of authorities], Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), http://wciom.ru/news/ratings/ocenka_vlastej/ (accessed on 06. 07. 2016).

which, in turn, further strengthens the personalized nature of the regime.

However, this high degree of personalization complicates the regime's mechanisms for any future transfer of power, since all other powerful figures and institutions are now wholly dependent on Putin. In addition, since the regime's legitimacy is heavily derived from Putin's personality traits

and charisma, it cannot simply be passed along to his successor. All of this makes the regime that much more nervous in the run-up to the parliamentary elections: Putin remains the regime's only source of popularity, legitimacy, and efficiency.

The regime's third underlying characteristic is its close relationship with the paternalism that permeates Russian society.

To be sure, some elements of civic society have emerged in different parts of the country, as demonstrated most vividly by the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya Square protests over the 2011 legislative election results. Sadly, similar organizational efforts have almost completely vanished from the sociopolitical sphere since then, not least because the state asserted greater control over the economy and tried to snuff out competition and private initiative. Small and mid-size businesses—the mainstays of civic culture—have stagnated or declined amid the current economic crisis. The Kremlin generally treats private businesses like a threat to the regime’s continued dominance and intentionally throws barriers in the way of their participation in political life.

The socioeconomic preferences of the majority of citizens are hard to miss. They have registered active approval of the country’s post-Crimea policies, which further diminished the level of support for democratic and liberal values in both politics and economics. This is not necessarily a recent development; the regime deliberately fostered the population’s paternalistic tendencies during the prosperous 2000s. Unfortunately, the resources available to the state for redistribution began to run dry after the 2008–2009 economic crisis, but the annexation of Crimea, anti-Western rhetoric, and the wave of conservatism helped maintain the population’s support for the regime at high levels. In the meantime, solutions to any number of pressing economic and social problems have been deferred, a situation that weighs heavily on the popularity of the government and feeds the sense seen in opinion polls that the country is on the wrong track.

PERCEPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE DUMA ELECTIONS’ SIGNIFICANCE

The Russian public hardly sees the September Duma elections as a milestone. 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.⁵ The Russian public knows all too well

parliament’s weak standing, which is laid out in the post-Communist Russian Constitution adopted in 1993. Citizens have also shown little interest in the numerous changes in election laws, which have been amended nearly 900 times since 2002.⁶

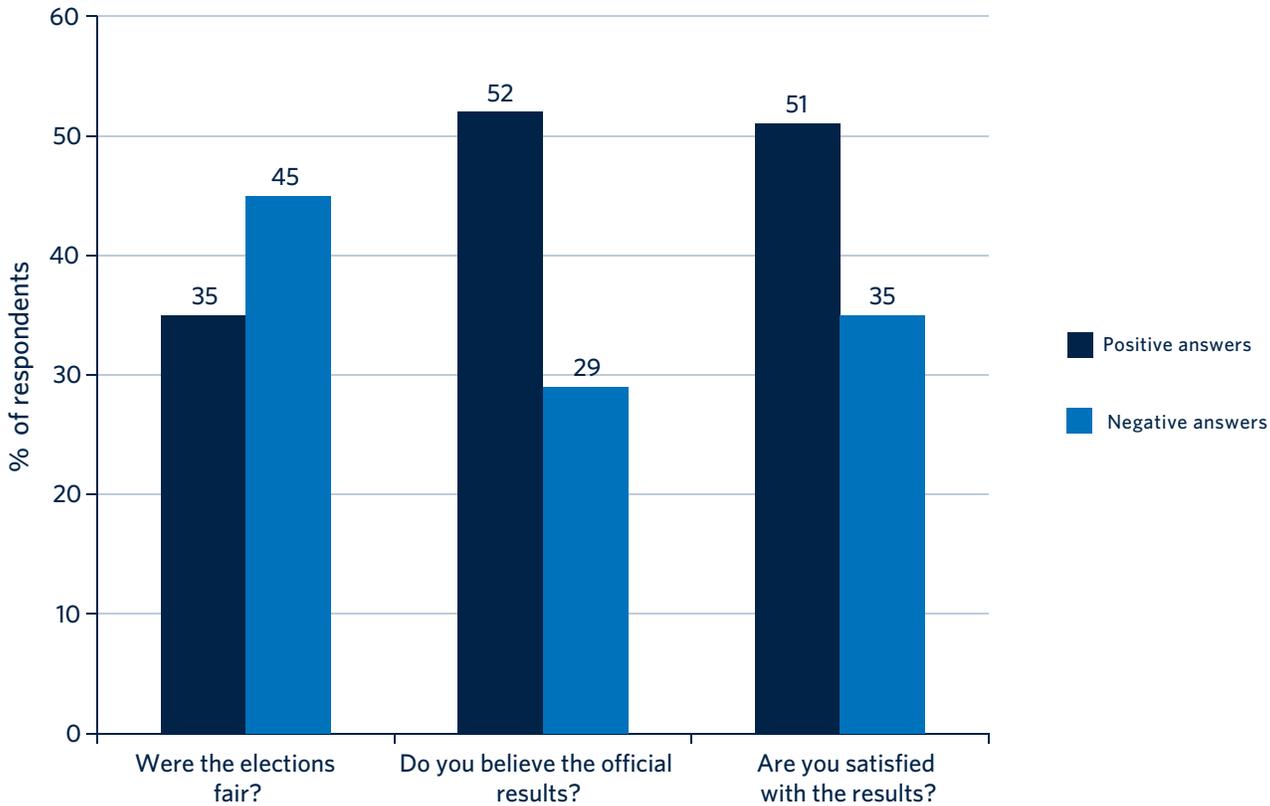
As a general matter, Russians view elections both as a ritual and a right to at least express their views about the status quo in the country. That said, a Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians taken just a few days after the controversial 2011 Duma elections captured the public’s ambivalence. The poll showed that a combination of protest sentiment and apathy underlies the country’s submissive political culture. Most Russians considered the elections unfair but nonetheless expressed satisfaction with the results (see figure 2). There’s only one explanation for this inconsistency in logic: people simply don’t believe that the Duma plays any substantive role in their lives, as the Levada Center’s Lev Gudkov told a Russian newspaper.⁷

Obviously, there is plenty of discussion in Western democracies about channeling popular discontent and sentiment into the presidency or governing bodies like national legislatures. An observer need look no further than populist movements like Marine Le Pen’s National Front in France and the Tea Party or Donald Trump in the United States to assess the seriousness of this challenge. In Russia, the situation is quite different. The next Duma is likely to bear a striking resemblance to its prior incarnations and will continue to embody the same paternalistic patterns of behavior that have strikingly little effect on actual policy.

REFORMS ENACTED AND SYSTEMS ADAPTED

The Russian political system and, in particular, legislation on political parties and elections have experienced a series of reforms over the past five years. The Kremlin insists that the reforms have effectively modernized and liberalized the political system via greater transparency of the electoral process. Conveniently enough, these moves were portrayed as increasing the legitimacy of the system as a whole. For its part, the political opposition was unimpressed, portraying the reforms as part of the continued erosion of respect for democratic principles.⁸

Figure 2. Attitudes Toward Unfair Elections



Source: "Rossiyane ob aktsiyakh protesta i proshedshikh vyborakh" [Russians' opinions on protest actions and past elections], Levada Center, December 28, 2011 (<http://www.levada.ru/2011/12/28/rossiyane-ob-aktsiyah-protesta-i-proshedshih-vyborah/>).

The situation is less cut-and-dried than either assessment might suggest. For example, changes to the laws on political parties in 2012 simplified the party registration process and led to an increase in the number of parties from seven in 2011 to seventy-four in 2016. Except for the party of prominent opposition figure Alexey Navalny, nearly all parties had an easy time registering. The 2013 election law also eased requirements for parties to participate in federal elections.

These reforms yielded only modest results. One-third of the new parties were essentially stillborn and have not managed to participate in any elections. Only ten of them, in addition to the four already represented in parliament,

managed to secure at least one seat in Russia's eighty-five regional legislatures, which automatically entitles them to register for federal elections. Moreover, not one of the new parties has demonstrated that it enjoys enough popularity after regional and local elections to have a realistic chance at overcoming the 5 percent threshold to enter the new Duma.

Some analysts believe that splitting the opposition vote among so many small parties was one of the regime's goals for electoral reform.⁹ While past regional and local elections have not exactly borne out this hypothesis, the upcoming Duma elections represent another opportunity to test it.

In any event, the registration of more parties has not cut into United Russia's dominance; the party received about 60 percent of the vote in the 2015 regional elections. Moreover, United Russia's candidates, as well as nominally independent candidates affiliated with regional governors and the local powers that be, landed more than 90 percent of the victories in single-mandate districts, while the three pro-regime opposition parties got the lion's share of the remaining Duma seats. All told, the new parties' handful of victories may have allowed them to take part in the federal elections but certainly didn't make them influential at the regional—let alone federal—level.

This does not mean, however, that the changes in political party legislation were completely pointless. The years-long ban on new parties promoted a certain degree of stagnation among the seven older parties, whose ranks include the three that are not represented in the parliament: Yabloko, the Patriots of Russia, and the Party of Growth (previously known as Just Cause). Once the entry barriers were substantially lowered, channels for competition among elite factions at the local and regional levels actually emerged. Pro-regime opposition parties have had to compete with new entities for their traditional electoral niche. Not coincidentally, the Kremlin rejected multiple requests to raise election eligibility requirements for the new parties.

The new playing field makes it easier for the new (albeit barely viable) parties to take part in elections. Some isolated victories by opposition candidates occurred at the gubernatorial level (for example, in Irkutsk Oblast) and in mayoral races in Petrozavodsk, Novosibirsk, and Yekaterinburg. But even this limited competition triggered problems for the new contenders. While cases of pressure against opposition parties may appear isolated, they surely were not accidental. The Civic Platform party nominally run by Mikhail Prokhorov, which received 4.5 percent in the 2013 regional elections, was rejected numerous times in regions where it was doing well; the party was forced to abandon the political arena after an internal split. In 2015, the People's Freedom Party, or PARNAS, was allowed to compete in the Kostroma

region, where it was unpopular, but was excluded from competing in the Novosibirsk region, a relative stronghold. And Galina Shirshina, a member of the Yabloko party, was removed as mayor of Petrozavodsk by the pro-regime majority in the municipal legislature.

Another standout feature of the current electoral system is the reintroduction of single-mandate districts for the first time since 2003. Criticism of this change focuses on whether the regime enacted this shift to, in a sense, cover its bases.¹⁰ While United Russia's popularity in party-list voting may drop, wins in single-mandate districts may help compensate. In fact, pro-regime candidates have consistently won in these types of districts with overwhelming numbers in recent years.

Still, there were important benefits to this reform, including the ability of voters to offer their parliamentary members something of a direct mandate. Likewise, incoming members of the Duma could, in theory at least, become less dependent on their party bosses. While it remains true that members of the Duma who represent single-member districts gravitate toward supporting the regime, their support is usually based on what they receive as a result of negotiations, rather than on absolute obedience. Single-member-district candidates, once elected, will start representing particular territories. Ideally, this should shift the motivations behind their legislative behavior. It is conceivable that Duma members from single-member districts could begin to coax the Duma to shed its well-deserved reputation of being a rubber-stamp body.

While all of these reforms have certain positive elements, the authorities are taking no chances and are working to reduce the threat posed by the protest vote and post-election protests in the country's largest cities. First, the date of the elections was intentionally moved forward from December to mid-September. This means that the height of the campaign coincides with summer vacations, which will primarily undermine the advertising campaigns of opposition parties that are basically shut out of media coverage. The vote will take place on one of the last warm weekends of the season, when many urbanites will probably

choose to spend that Sunday at their summer houses or outdoors. Lower turnout among city-dwellers will certainly help the ruling party.

In addition, the single-member districts were set up in a rather peculiar fashion: all large cities with the exception of Moscow and St. Petersburg were split among two or three election districts. The motives behind the move are obvious: in “Russia-1”—the term coined by political geographer Natalia Zubarevich for Russian cities whose population is at least half a million¹¹—there are consistently lower levels of support for Putin and United Russia. In September, the weight of city-based voters will be diluted by the submissive rural electorate in single-member districts.

The Kremlin also is imposing tight controls on poll monitors and journalists. When they were announced in February 2016, the official explanation for these moves was to prevent violations at the polls. In reality, the new regulations will complicate the work of monitors, whose findings helped spark the 2011 protests.¹²

Less noticed, but potentially even more consequential, have been the regime’s attempts to stoke irrational, conspiratorial fears within the Russian ruling class and society at large about foreign interference in the elections. In February 2016, Putin warned the Federal Security Service (FSB) of “foreign adversaries” that were purportedly preparing to sway the upcoming Duma elections.¹³ On cue, Russian security services have stepped up their involvement in what should be a purely domestic political process.

Not coincidentally, Putin’s announcement has led to numerous acts of vandalism and harassment against Russia’s leading human rights activists, including Alexey Navalny and the Memorial organization, a longtime Kremlin bête noire. These incidents prompted a statement from the new Central Election Commission chair, Ella Pamfilova, who has an impeccable record as a human rights activist. According to Pamfilova, “Aggressive behavior by various types of fake groups has been escalating in the run-up to the election

campaign . . . occasionally with the acquiescence of law enforcement officials. There have been attacks against ideological adversaries. . . . I believe that this is playing with fire—it may negate all our attempts to conduct fair, proper, and normal elections.”¹⁴

CAMPAIGN INTRIGUE: PARTIES, CANDIDATES, AND PROGRAMS

There is no overlooking the glaring flaws of the upcoming elections—the dearth of actual competition between parties and politicians, let alone the underwhelming competition of ideas. These issues stem from the complete dominance by pro-regime forces in Russian political life and society’s paternalistic outlook. Paradoxically enough, pro-regime forces benefit from the fact that citizens blame the government for the crisis yet pin most of their hopes on it to lead the country out of its difficulties.

Adapting to the crisis—for example, by saving more and lowering expectations about living standards—has become the prevailing strategy for most Russians. Society’s patience and ability to adapt help explain why many sociologists believe that a new wave of protests is unlikely.¹⁵ People are reluctant to rail against the regime and its pet party since they hope that the state will still be able to ensure their economic and social well-being. Power is equated with money and distribution of benefits; therefore, it’s entirely rational to continue voting for those in power.¹⁶

For the same reason, voters are unlikely to support non-mainstream opposition parties—in the eyes of the majority of voters, these parties are going to lose anyway. Under this logic, it would be far better to give your protest vote to one of the pro-regime opposition parties. Of course, the average voter might not necessarily realize that such a protest vote is, in effect, a pro-regime vote. The regime would like all political processes, including expressions of discontent, to take place within the legal political framework. That includes expressions of discontent by the four parties in the parliament, all of which play an integral part in the regime’s neo-corporatist model.

The regime also enjoys residual benefits from the rally-round-the-flag effect of the Crimea annexation. Official propaganda actively churns out anti-Western content, contributing to what's known as Russia's current "besieged fortress" mentality, which forces people to unite under their leader in the face of imminent external threats. The intervention in Syria has been quite popular, and the regime has benefited from a wave of campaigns to promote conservative and traditional values and stereotypes.¹⁷

All of this is no guarantee that the ruling party will get the election results it wants. As discussed, even the election of a weak and unimportant parliament triggers an outpouring of emotion from a segment of the electorate intent on spiting the regime. Paternalistic feelings can take on multiple characteristics. For one group of voters, the elections are an opportunity to express gratitude to the regime for its continued, albeit insufficient, support. For another segment, the elections will be used to register disappointment at receiving so little, while a third group will want to display its anger at being treated so poorly.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the government in September is its shrinking resource base for revenue redistribution amid general belt-tightening. This is a vicious circle. As social spending declines, average income levels fall and pension payments fail to keep up with inflation. Consequently, some of the pro-regime United Russia electorate will switch allegiances, with the disappointed voters joining A Just Russia and the angry ones flocking to KPRF (which continues to vie with LDPR for the second-highest approval rating nationwide; see figure 3).

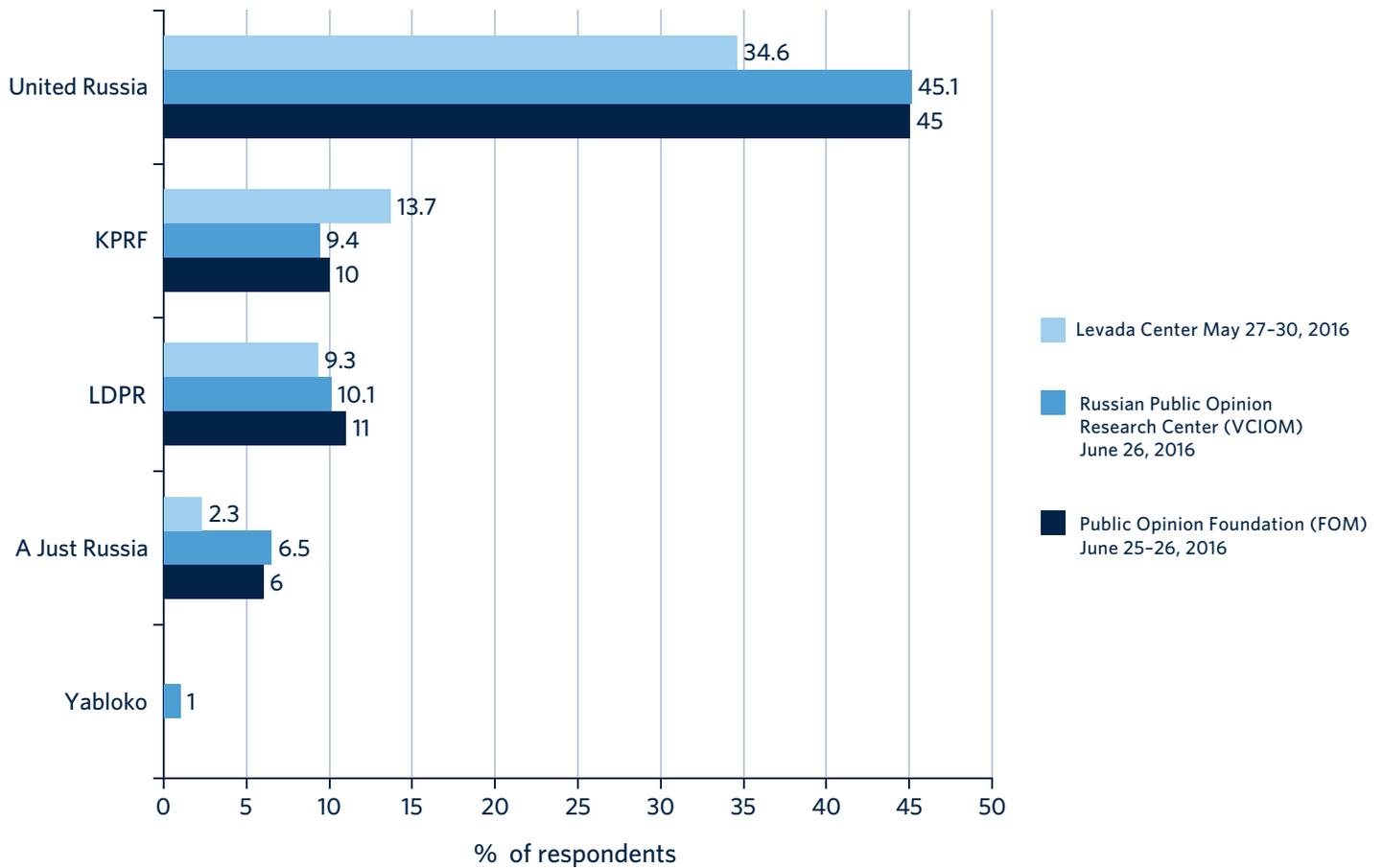
These shifts are already under way. Three leading polling organizations report that since January 2016, United Russia's approval rating has dipped 5–8 percent, which clearly stems from popular frustration with the economy and declining living standards. It seems reasonable to expect that United Russia will be the target of considerable criticism during the election campaign and that there will be further drops in the party's ratings.

Nevertheless, two factors may offset the likelihood of a significant collapse in support for United Russia. First, the 2011 protests were precipitated by Putin's bombshell announcement on the eve of the elections at the United Russia convention that he planned to return to the presidency. The current crisis is unlikely to serve as such a catalyst for similar protests. Second, the regime will no doubt succeed in ensuring that the beneficiaries of United Russia's misfortune are the same tried-and-true pro-regime opposition parties that let people vent their frustration and anger but have little impact on politics. Moreover, the angry urbanites who were central to what happened in 2011–2012 show no signs of mobilizing ahead of the September vote.

The nature of the neo-corporatist system means that any real opposition will be stuck outside of parliament's walls or on the streets. Few voters will opt to follow these parties, let alone invite the type of retaliation experienced by participants in the May 2012 demonstrations on Bolotnaya Square. If the elections were held today, United Russia would still get about 60 percent of the vote and two-thirds of the Duma seats tapped from party lists. Even a purely hypothetical drop of 10 percent in its approval ratings would simply return United Russia to its 2011-era ratings. Moreover, even if United Russia's ratings were to bottom out around 40 percent, it would still finish far ahead of other parties, which would get comparable shares of the remaining 60 percent of the party-list seats.

United Russia is nevertheless somewhat vulnerable since it's been unable to make sweeping promises of government largesse. In the past, the regime never bothered to prepare an economic blueprint keyed to the Duma elections. The best example is the 2007 election, when United Russia put forward the so-called Putin plan, which was little more than a summary of the president's eight previous addresses to the Federal Assembly. Yet even this lack of specificity was welcomed by the electorate; a whopping 58 percent of Russians supported the nonexistent Putin plan in 2007, according to the Levada Center.¹⁸

Figure 3. Russian Political Parties' Approval Ratings



Sources: "Elektoral'nyy Reyting Politicheskikh Partiy" [Electoral Ratings of Political Parties], Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), http://wciom.ru/news/ratings/elektoralnyj_rejting_politicheskix_partij/; "Dominanty. Pole mneniy" [Dominants. Field of Public Opinion], Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), June 2, 2016, <http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d212016.pdf>; "Elektoral'nye reytingi partiy" [Electoral Ratings of the Parties], Levada Center, June 6, 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/2016/06/06/elektoralnye-rejtingi-partij/>

United Russia's hands are somewhat tied at the moment: it can't blame the deteriorating situation on regional authorities or Dmitry Medvedev's government, since the prime minister himself heads the party list. As for Putin, he will likely lose more than he gains by associating himself with the party. Since 2012, Putin has skipped all but one United Russia event, even though the party formally nominated him as its candidate in the 2012 presidential election. Putin has expressed support for United Russia in 2016 because he

understands that it will be harder for the party to succeed without his endorsement.

The Communists appear to be the strongest contender for second place, thanks to their reputation for strong-sounding opposition to the status quo and heavy focus on domestic issues. In 2011, they successfully attracted support from voters who wanted to protest the regime yet did not share the party's traditional ideological profile. So far the KPRF's

campaign has focused on these nonideological protest voters. Of course, the party has not totally forgotten its base and continues to crank out campaign messages that touch on Soviet nostalgia, blatantly Stalinist themes, and Orthodox Christian values.

LDPR has made a habit of finishing third in recent years, only occasionally coming close to KPRF. LDPR, it's worth noting, is the only parliamentary party that steers clear of paternalism. Instead, it stresses militarism, patriotism, and imperialist rhetoric. The authors expect that LDPR's prospects are impinged upon by its limited appeal to the protest electorate and the fact that the ruling regime has effectively co-opted LDPR's ultra-right rhetoric. Its primary asset remains Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the party's firebrand leader.

A Just Russia, meanwhile, has traditionally had a difficult time—at least, until recently—clearing the 5 percent electoral threshold in the opinion polls. This time, the party is almost assured its share of Duma seats. The public tends to associate the party with the regime, making it easier for a frustrated voter to make the switch. Moreover, A Just Russia's campaign will dwell on pressing social policy issues, such as eliminating payments for capital repairs or the high tariffs charged by assorted monopolies for communal services. In other words, A Just Russia can criticize the government for its unpopular decisions, which United Russia cannot afford to do.

It is unclear how many independent and civic-minded voters—that is, the angry urbanites who played such an important role in the 2011 campaign—are likely to go to the polls in 2016. Attempts to create a party composed of 2011–2012-era activists failed. The Civic Platform, one of the proposed parties, fell apart, and the authorities actively blocked Alexey Navalny's efforts to create his own party. Meanwhile, the Democratic Coalition that was to include Navalny's supporters, as well as PARNAS activists led by former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, stumbled due to internal rifts.

At this point, there is only one party that may appear attractive to opposition-minded voters. The Yabloko party has

retained its basic structure and personnel over the years and attracted a number of newcomers involved in the protest movement while scoring a handful of election victories along the way. Even though its approval ratings remain less than 1 percent, Yabloko may be able to rally the opposition vote due to the absence of other alternatives. However, the odds of overcoming the 5 percent entry barrier remain slim.

None of the remaining, newly created parties have promising chances in September. Of the parties that are eligible for automatic registration, at least three—the Communists of Russia, KPSS (which mimics the acronym of the Soviet-era Communist party), and the Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice—are clearly clones of other parties. They serve mostly as spoilers, taking away votes from stronger parties with parallel agendas. A pair of other parties—Motherland and the Patriots of Russia—are somewhat more serious projects that occasionally succeed in local elections, sometimes with support from the government and factions of the regional elite. But these ventures will most likely fail to garner the requisite 5 percent of the vote at the federal level because they are competing for the same segment of the electorate as the three other paternalistic parties already in the Duma. (Meanwhile, the government-backed Party of Growth, which is headed by Boris Titov, who also serves as Putin's ombudsman for the rights of the business community, got off to a late start and failed to distinguish itself ideologically. The Green Alliance remains essentially out of the running.)

SINGLE-MEMBER DISTRICTS: REVITALIZING THE RULING PARTY

As discussed, the authors are skeptical that competition in single-member districts will be tough. Only a relatively small number of current members of the Duma used to represent such districts. When it comes to new candidates, United Russia has a clear advantage, thanks to its connections to the country's political class, administrative elites, and pro-regime community leaders.

The All-Russia People's Front, a pro-Kremlin coalition created in 2011 between United Russia and a handful of nominally

nongovernmental organizations, has created a pool of activists who work with the public and, in some cases, enjoy popular respect. These and other candidates were elected to the United Russia party list in May 2016 through open primaries, which attracted nearly 10 percent of Russian voters.

Through these elections, United Russia not only replenished its reserve of Duma candidates quite smoothly but also further allowed competition among loyal regional elites, making their disagreements public several months before the elections. Moreover, the primaries undermined the party bureaucracy's monopoly on candidate selection, effectively eliminating figures whose best days are behind them. The primaries also allowed the regime to test various mechanisms for mobilizing its electoral base.

In other words, the ruling party has taken a rather serious approach to the task of selecting its single-member-district candidates. A look at the list of candidates reveals a slew of public figures, such as teachers, doctors, and media personalities, who are likely to attract support. Likewise, these candidates enjoy access to administrative resources and the support of United Russia's core electorate. In the event of a challenge by candidates from other parties, any anti-regime vote will be effectively split. Since there is only one round of voting in single-member districts, voters will have to immediately rally around the two strongest candidates—which presents a stark challenge that will ultimately favor United Russia.

United Russia officials have also suggested publicly that the party may be willing to stand down in certain districts, allegedly in the interest of allowing the Duma to retain opposition members who, according to United Russia's Duma faction whip Sergei Neverov, are "strong experts in their fields."¹⁹ The KPRF immediately rejected this idea to avoid accusations of collusion with the regime. In the end, United Russia opted not to nominate candidates in only eighteen of 225 districts; not surprisingly, most of these districts have a notable incumbent member of parliament from one of the three parliamentary parties (seven from A Just

Russia, four from LDPR, and three from the Communists) or are home to the leaders of new and nonparliamentary Motherland and Civic Platform parties.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE NEXT DUMA

The likely lack of any real change in the Duma's party composition does not mean that there won't be any changes in Russian politics in the near future. Indeed, broader changes in Russian politics are inevitable over the coming five years. The only question is whether the new makeup of the Duma will be able to adequately respond to such changes. Unfortunately, given the Duma's likely makeup and prior patterns of behavior, the outlook does not bode well.

Taking a step back from these traditional patterns of behavior in the Duma, it is increasingly clear that the regime's current model of state-sponsored redistribution of economic and social benefits is starting to exhaust itself. The reintroduction of single-mandate representatives in the Duma may serve as a brake on party discipline. For the first time in many years, the system will have a counterbalance to the absolute domination of party and administrative bureaucracy.

How significant this factor will become hinges largely on the type of socioeconomic policies the executive branch decides to pursue after the elections. When deciding to extend the president's term from four years to six and the Duma's term from four years to five, the regime tried to put as much time as possible between the related elections. No longer, the regime decided, would parliamentary elections look simply like presidential primaries.²⁰

But as is often the case under Putin, a tactical success is becoming a strategic problem. A form of pre-election indecision—that is, a natural avoidance of reform on the eve of elections—may now linger until the March 2018 presidential election, although economic and social realities increasingly demand immediate action. Even if the regime continues makeshift austerity measures—such as partial cuts in social spending, reorganization of the health-care and educational systems, and inadequate increases

in pensions—single-member-district deputies are likely to generate vocal opposition. Renegotiation of the state budget appears likely and could become quite heated, given the limited resources at the government's disposal. If more radical austerity measures are proposed, Duma members will find themselves torn between loyalty to the regime and their constituents.

The Kremlin and the government can certainly get any legislation they want passed in the Duma. But austerity measures are bound to be quite unpopular. The next Duma will remain a largely passive participant in the policymaking process. But that obscures the fact that the September parliamentary elections could expose the contradiction between the regime's short- and long-term legitimacy. In the short term, the results will shore up the regime's legitimacy. Over the longer term, the only pillar for the regime's legitimacy remains Putin himself, and the Duma's main function will be to promote his increasingly personalized agenda. These priorities are far removed from the long-term economic, social, and political challenges that confront Russian society.

THE SYSTEM'S LEGITIMACY: POSSIBLE SEPARATION OF SOCIETY FROM THE STATE

In all likelihood, Russian state and society will have to coexist in the coming years in a less hierarchical atmosphere than currently exists, despite the state's authoritarian tendencies. Free exchange of information on the Internet and social networks will foster less hierarchy, as will informal communities where members have direct contacts with each other. Moreover, the public remains fully able to form alternative, nonregime points of view, while various communities maintain the ability to self-regulate—all the more so if government regulation is increasingly perceived as archaic, inconvenient, and inefficient.

This situation and these trends bode ill for the regime's current model. The regime's neo-corporatist bent will be increasingly incapable of managing the public's behavior and assessing constituents' interests and attitudes. Mechanisms of social mobilization, already weak, will deteriorate even further;

the state will receive no feedback from the public; constitutional underpinnings will continue to degrade and end up becoming largely symbolic, if they aren't already.

This situation poses many dangers for the public, and it is perhaps even more dangerous for the state, which risks becoming dysfunctional and deinstitutionalized. The regime's stability-oriented policies will lead nowhere, and the system will lose its ability to renew itself and to react to both long-term and situational challenges. Haphazard political and administrative decisions will be divorced from reality and may even wind up becoming contradictory to it. As a result, an informal economy, as well as informal social connections and organizations, will gradually lie outside the realm of the state and will help to restore lost interpersonal and institutional trust.

On the one hand, this kind of adaptation by Russian society will allow the country to go through the post-2018 political cycle without any significant social or political sources of upheaval. On the other hand, the state risks becoming a superfluous superstructure that is distrusted by the public and incapable of providing its citizens with quality services in exchange for continued taxation. Such a state will be increasingly unacceptable not only to the participatory political subculture—that is, those who aspire to make inputs in the political life—but also to the so-called subject subculture, which limits its involvement in politics to praising or criticizing outputs of the government's work, and which will express increasing frustration with the state's mechanisms.²¹

Looking forward, few structural reforms are possible, as the state has effectively lost its political will for modernization. Most likely, the state will simply respond to new challenges with selective forms of repression, propaganda campaigns, and inadequate ad hoc decisions that are presented as technocratic solutions.

Russia faces a looming different crisis of legitimacy. After all, regime change via elections remains effectively impossible in Russia. Even in the highly unlikely instance that

the pro-regime United Russia party loses its Duma majority, the parliament's weakness and the absence of any real opposition would leave little chance to chart an alternative political course. In contrast, many of the parties that were in power in the West during the 2008–2009 crisis lost the following elections, and the new governments started charting new socioeconomic courses.

Additionally, for the West, the rise of new, untested political forces often compels the ruling parties to consider wholesale changes to their own political directions. The most telling recent example is the Brexit referendum, to which the UK's ruling Conservative Party had to adjust in order to keep the pressure from its Euroskeptic wing and the UK Independence Party in check. New parties have likewise become important players in France, Spain, and Austria. In the United States, the ostensibly indestructible two-party system was challenged from both the right, by Donald Trump, and the left, by Bernie Sanders. Radical-left Euroskeptics came to power in Greece, but they had to negotiate the terms of keeping the country in the European Union rather than leaving the organization altogether. This again confirms the basic definition of democracy as a political configuration that “allows citizens to change their decisions and leaders without questioning the political order,” according to political theorist Nadia Urbinati.²²

Russia, to be fair, does have party competition, however flawed it might be. But competing programs and ideas are largely absent within the Duma, unless they are about squabbles over how to redistribute waning social benefits or contests of patriotic rhetoric. To paraphrase Urbinati, without serious changes in the political order, Russians will have fewer and fewer chances to affect decisions and leaders.

WHAT DOES 2016 MEAN FOR FUTURE PRESIDENTIAL POLLS?

For Russia, the 2016 elections are a test of the strength of the Kremlin's current system and preparation for the conditions that will prevail during the 2018 presidential election. The overall goal of these September elections is to preserve

the current power of both the elites and the president, as well as to help enhance the system's adaptiveness and survivability. The Duma elections will not produce new presidential-caliber political figures.

However, it's clear that problems run rampant through these plans. The four-party Duma, and the broader four-party system, will inevitably weaken, since the aging leaders of LDPR and KPRF—the key parties that prop up the system—will eventually leave the political scene, and their parties, along with A Just Russia, will need to be revamped. As it is, the loyalist four-party model doesn't really provide the “managed parliamentarianism” the regime says it wants, and the question of how to support the system without familiar leaders like Zhirinovskiy and KPRF head Gennady Zyuganov will remain open in the next parliamentary term.

Another issue is the possible erosion of the imitational civil society—such as the Civic Chamber, the All-Russia People's Front, and state-sponsored NGOs—which represents another part of Russia's neo-corporatist model. How serious will the effective separation between the state and civil society be? How can the regime manage changes when all agents of real change and modernization are, at best, outside state control, and sometimes even in direct opposition to the state? The 2016–2018 system, which cares only about preserving the power of the present elite, is not ready to deal with these questions.

Meanwhile, the president will find himself in a trap. Legitimacy bestowed on a charismatic leader is not automatically passed down to his successors—see, for instance, the inability of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro to follow in Hugo Chávez's oversized shoes. No other succession mechanism, however, exists. In the United States, during the last year of the second term the president is called a lame duck, and—despite the fears engendered by Trump's candidacy—the transfer of power doesn't entail a political crisis. Russia, though, has never had a democratic transfer of power by way of elections—unless we want to consider the Putin-Medvedev switch in 2008 and 2012. Therefore, elites have been

operating under the assumption that Putin will rule the country for years to come and will naturally run for reelection in 2018, when he will be sixty-five years old.

Nevertheless, the elites will start thinking about the succession of power immediately after Putin's 2018 victory. The problem, however, is not simply that Putin is constitutionally obligated to leave office after 2024, but that both his age and the length of his rule will also become factors in the elites' calculus.

This means that despite his high popularity ratings and nearly unlimited powers, the president might become something of a lame duck promptly at the start of his next term. In this context, even the slightest sign of weakness by his regime could provoke a rebalancing of political forces, as well as a shift in the regime's financial supporters. Such a turn of events could gradually destabilize the political structure legitimated by the 2016 and 2018 elections.

While trying to balance various factions, the president is likely to tack toward the middle and continue well-established policy priorities. Putin is extremely unlikely to change the current approach, which is heavily laden with isolationist and nationalistic themes. At the same time, he will call upon the liberals loyal to him to stave off the collapse of the economic system.

Eventually, Russia's political and economic situation is likely to provoke demands for change—and the current regime, as it goes through the motions for the 2016 and 2018 elections, is ill-prepared to deal with this challenge.

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