

## The Implications of Russia's Legislative Vote for the EU

*Sofía López Piqueres and Domenico Valenza*

### Executive Summary

- > Despite United Russia's impressive result, winning 76.22 per cent of the seats in the Duma, the 2016 Russian legislative elections have been characterised by the lowest turnout since 1993. The new composition of the Duma does not reflect the economic and social challenges currently faced by the Putin regime.
- > Both the low turnout and the unrepresentativeness of the Duma suggest that opposing voices are not effectively integrated in the democratic process in the Russian Federation. As a result, significant protest potential looms in Russian society.
- > The Putin regime resorts especially to an assertive foreign policy to cover up domestic problems, making the country a continuously unstable interlocutor for the European Union.
- > To deal with this instability, the EU should adopt a strategy operating with two time horizons: in the short term, it should confront Russian foreign policy assertiveness with resoluteness and cohesiveness. In the long term, it should prepare itself for potentially major changes in Russian society, notably by building stronger expertise on Russia and its political system inside the EU and by more strongly engaging with Russian civil society.

On 18 September 2016, the legislative elections held in Russia resulted in an overwhelming victory of the governing party United Russia (UR), which won 343 out of 450 seats of the State Duma. Despite this resounding triumph, the record low turnout and the economic and social challenges faced by the Putin

regime suggest that the European Union (EU) will continue to face an extremely unstable neighbour in the years to come. This Policy Brief starts by recalling how Russian elites had responded to the demonstrations that had followed the last legislative elections in 2011. Against this backdrop, it interprets the results of the 2016 elections, emphasising how the lack of openness and transparency of the electoral process and the general economic and social challenges faced by Russia could soon undermine the stability of Putin's regime. Based on this analysis, the Policy Brief discusses the implications of the vote and advances recommendations on how the EU could deal with Russia's increasing foreign policy assertiveness in the short term and respond appropriately to the country's volatile domestic context in the long term.

### The 2011 elections and their aftermath

There was never any doubt that UR would win the 2016 legislative elections, taking into consideration the political and electoral measures adopted after the controversial 2011 elections. In 2011, the legislative elections and UR's victory took place in a context marked by widespread systematic violations of electoral standards, strong media control and the disturbing announcement that Putin would again run for presidency in March 2012. As a result, thousands took to the streets in what have become the largest mass protests since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To curb the deterioration of Putin's legitimacy and that of the Russian political system, the government decided to intervene immediately after the protests started. One of the first changes consisted in amending the law on political parties in order to facilitate their registration. Also, to allow independent candidates to run for elections and to meet protesters' demands at least to some extent, Putin decreased the

parliamentary threshold from 7 to 5 per cent. The third major change presented as a step towards greater liberalisation was the adoption of a mixed unlinked electoral system. Under such a system, half of the candidates are elected from single-mandate independent district lists and the other half from a federal list of candidates in one federal constituency. Addressing the Federal Assembly in 2012, Putin defended this idea by stating that it would allow for more political competition, guaranteeing equal access to the media to all political parties.

Finally, political elites also decided to address protesters' general discontent over the opacity of the electoral process, and in particular the lack of independence of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC). The CEC was until March 2016 led by Vladimir Churov, a man who had already worked with Putin in the Saint-Petersburg Mayor's Office in the 1990s. These personal ties and Churov's boast of his exactitude when predicting the results of the 2011 elections at a meeting with then-President Medvedev, were seen as signs for the lack of independence of the CEC. To meet one of the main demands of the protesters, Churov was removed from his position and replaced by a prominent civil society leader and former Head of the Presidential Commission/Council on Human Rights, Ella Pamfilova. Pamfilova and her team managed to partially clean the tarnished image of the CEC, to the extent that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the 2016 elections had been administered transparently.

### **Russia's politics unravelled: interpreting the 2016 election results**

On 18 September 2016, UR obtained 105 seats more than in the 2011 vote. It now has more seats than in past legislative terms. While both the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and the Communists obtained slightly more than 13 per cent, and the pro-Putin 'A Just Russia' halved its share of votes (about 6 per cent), liberal forces failed to enter parliament.

Following the legislative vote and the absence of demonstrations against the regime, one might be inclined to think that Russian voters rewarded Putin's work. However, this depiction seems inaccurate. UR's comfortable victory illustrates above all that the political and electoral measures taken in the run-up to

the 2016 vote successfully helped to prevent the potential for disruption that was seen with the mass protests in 2011.

At the political level, the post-2011 reforms have not resulted in an effective strengthening of democratic standards. Instead, they proved to be a sign of the Kremlin's 'make-up tactics', that is, attempts at changing the façade of the electoral and political system without touching its foundations. The main motive behind the reforms implemented after 2011 was thus not a genuine desire to liberalise and breathe competition into the Russian political system, but to showcase the image of the liberalisation of the system so as to avoid a repetition of the 2011 mass protests and a menace to Putin's and UR's omnipotence. For instance, the law on political parties approved in 2011 did not translate into greater political competition. While in 2011, seven parties took part in the elections, but only four made it to the State Duma, in the 2016 election, the number of parties increased more than tenfold, but only 14 met the criteria necessary to participate and just two more parties than in 2011 obtained seats by single-seat constituency (one representative each for Rodina and Civic Platform).

Furthermore, Putin's proposal of a mixed unlinked electoral system was met with criticism by experts and opposition parties because it would permit UR (or any other party obtaining more than 30 per cent) to be overrepresented through wins in single-member constituencies. This system has proved successful for the regime because it was coupled with gerrymandering, namely the redrawing of the electoral map to merge areas where there is a concentration of inhabitants prone to voting against UR with areas where the party usually reaps good results.

Not surprisingly, civil society organisations and think tanks, among them the Civil Initiatives Committee founded by the former Minister of Finance Alexei Kudrin, also saw the rather quiet election campaign of 2016 as part of a strategy of the regime designed to reduce the turnout and minimise risks.

Additionally, and more importantly, if the legitimacy of the elections is also based on the turnout, one may claim that it has weakened from 2011 to 2016, as the overall turnout decreased from 60.2 per cent to 47.8 per cent. Moreover, as Figure 1 shows, the decrease

was more pronounced in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, often referred to as the ‘two capitals’, not only for their historical status of ‘capital’, but also because they are the two most developed and urbanised areas of the country. While in the 1990s demonstrations were largely regional and spread throughout the country, as of the early 2000s both cities have become the key locations of Russian citizens’ protest and remain strategic areas for future protests.

**Figure 1: Turnout of 2011 and 2016 legislative elections in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg**

	Moscow	Saint-Petersburg
2011	61.7%	54.5%
2016	35.2%	32.5%

### Regime reactions to post-electoral potential for social unrest

Even if no demonstrations have taken place after the 2016 vote, one should be careful in assessing that protest potential has lowered when compared to 2011. Data on demonstrations since 2008 by the Russian Centre for Social and Labour Rights shows that since early 2015, labour protests in Russia have become more frequent and radical, with daily demonstrations throughout 2016. In this respect, more than half of the demands were related to delays in the payment of wages. The report concluded that, while the country witnesses an accumulation of quantitative changes, the protest movement has not yet evolved towards a more coherent structure, as demonstrations remain local and therefore isolated.

These increased labour protests are a direct effect of the severe economic recession. While Putin’s model of stability worked fine throughout the 2000s, since high oil prices allowed the Kremlin to ensure growth and stability, at a time of crisis this model is coming under mounting domestic pressure. Low global oil prices have a dramatic impact on economies highly dependent on natural resources, and Russia earns half of the government revenues from resource sales. Additionally, the serious lack of technological capabilities to improve oil and gas extraction processes has further diminished state resources. All this has resulted in an ongoing rouble devaluation, with Russian households and companies struggling to afford foreign goods and

services. To cope with the economic decline, cuts to welfare are expected in the 2017 budget, which will normally be approved in December 2016. The anticipation of the legislative vote from December to September 2016 (Duma elections have always taken place in December since 1993) can be seen as a tactical move to prevent oppositional parties and civil society movements from voicing criticism during elections.

In a country facing a severe recession and increasing social discontent, elections should reflect citizens’ concerns and re-orient policy-makers’ choices. Yet that is not the case in Russia. Civil society demands are not channelled through the electoral process. Rather than being an opportunity to voice criticism, the vote allows elites to perpetuate their control over state resources. In this respect, Russian elections are not a real snapshot of the country’s situation but rather an expression of a virtual reality.

To cope with internal challenges, the Kremlin has repeatedly recurred to an aggressive foreign policy. As part of this foreign policy, the Russian ruling elite has recurred to a mix of military force and other non-conventional means such as humanitarian aid, economic measures, propaganda, and cyber-attacks. This approach usually fulfils manifold objectives, as it boosts the Kremlin’s popularity in the short term, unites and rallies the population behind the elites and detracts attention from domestic problems. In the light of the ongoing crisis, such tactics are likely to remain a major component of the Kremlin’s strategy. While Putin’s moves remain hard to predict, the attempt to cover up domestic troubles through assertive foreign policy is likely to remain a persistent trend over the next years.

### Implications for the EU’s relations with Russia

In light of the multiple challenges faced by the regime, European policy-makers should be prepared to face a highly volatile neighbour in the coming years. This will require a strategy operating with two time horizons, designed to address Russia’s leadership in the short term, while reinforcing its contacts with societal forces in the long term. In the short term, deterrence at the military level should be coupled with constructive engagement on those international challenges in which the Kremlin shows more willingness to cooperate. In the long term, European policy-makers should take into account the possibility of a deterioration of Russia’s

domestic stability. To overcome this challenge, soft-power measures designed to build knowledge about Russia in the EU and to reach out to Russian societal forces could be beneficial for the EU.

In the short term, to limit the risk of military incursions, the EU should first and foremost be firm and keep the sanctions in place, with a particular focus on those targeting the military sector, in order to block Russia's access to new technologies and instruments. Resoluteness and cohesiveness on sanctions is one of the key tools the EU has to curb Russia's confrontational approach. Sanctions not only make access to technology harder, but if kept for a long time and agreed on by all member states, they will help mitigate the ever-increasing negative image Russian elites have of the EU as a weak intergovernmental organisation whose internal tensions can be easily exploited. Perceptions of weakness are costly at this stage, hence the need to convey an image of EU unity and cohesion.

Alongside short-term containment, and in a more long-term perspective, in a conflict-ridden relationship like the one between the EU and Russia, economic measures should be coupled with more investment in the field of education, science and culture.

First, research projects covering Russian domestic politics, economy, history or sociology from the Russian perspective(s), would help understand current developments and better foresee possible scenarios. In this context, the creation of a Committee of Historians or a division within the EU Liaison Committee of Historians, a committee composed of historians of EU member states working on contemporary history, devoted exclusively to the research of EU-Russia relations and Russian history as well as to the proposal of recommendations should be examined. This team could work with the communication team set up in 2015 by the European External Action Service to raise awareness of Russia's disinformation campaigns.

Second, while in the past decade Russian civil society organisations (CSOs) strongly benefited from European aid, and among others from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), since 2012, the Russian foreign agent law has affected funding opportunities. Under this law, CSOs receiving European funding are obliged to register themselves as 'foreign agents', leading to additional bureaucracy and public

stigmatisation, as the expression was used for espionage activities during the Cold War. Nonetheless, the EU should continue making funds available to Russian civil society.

Third, it is fundamental that the EU contribute to shaping a pro-European Russian elite in the long term. Despite the fact that the current political climate discourages academic contacts, education remains a key component of EU soft power. Seeing that the number of Russian students and academics taking part in Erasmus exchanges is very low (1900 in 2015, according to the Commission), the EU should consider the creation of a specific scholarship programme with larger funds targeting Russian undergraduate and graduate students. This could provide a significant opportunity to educate young Russians in and about the EU and foster critical reflection on the Russian political system. Also, this measure would reassure Russians that the EU does not consider them collectively responsible for the ongoing escalations, and that sanctions are intended to ratchet up the pressure on the elites, not on the average citizen.

Fourth, while space for human rights initiatives has been shrinking, the EU could and should open up opportunities for cooperation on other funding programmes than Erasmus+ or the Horizon 2020 programme for research and innovation, in which Russian partners are allowed to participate. These examples could also be extended to the Europe for Citizens programme, which aims to "raise awareness of remembrance, common history and values". In particular, commemorations in the 2016-2020 period are a cornerstone of both European and Russian history (i.e. the 1917 revolution, the end of WWI in 1918, and the beginning of the Cold War in 1948).

Finally, greater attention should be devoted to tourism as a way to foster people-to-people contacts. A significant decrease in Russian tourists to European member states as a result of harder economic conditions, rouble devaluation and expensive visa formalities has recently been observed. Although the EU does not have significant room for manoeuvre to deal with the economic situation and the rouble devaluation, more could be done on the latter. While negotiations for a visa-free regime are currently frozen, European member states should remove fees for Russian citizens, together with nationals from Georgia,

Kosovo, and Ukraine (all citizens currently pay a reduced visa fee of 35 EUR). The effect of this measure will be twofold: on the one hand, from an economic point of view, it will contribute to facilitate tourism; on the other hand, this unilateral measure will shape the perception that, despite cooling relations, the EU welcomes Russian visitors to Europe, also as a way to enhance people-to-people contact.

Although these soft power measures will only yield results in the long term, they are paramount to understanding Russia and reinforcing ties with potential future Russian elites, and should therefore not be neglected in favour of purely economic or military options.

### Conclusion

Following the 2016 legislative elections, the confrontational foreign policy the Putin regime has adopted to detract attention from domestic problems implies that relations between the EU and Russia are likely to remain highly volatile for years to come.

The unfolding of the elections and its results corroborate the make-believe nature of the political and electoral processes in Russia. The numerous institutional hurdles to conduct of free and transparent elections, as well as the acceptance of weak democratic practices over the years has turned such elections into a mere process of rubberstamping of the candidates backed by the regime and its media apparatus and of those tolerated by the government.

As such, the electoral result demonstrates that the increasing social demands are not channelled through the democratic process, and could soon re-emerge in a more unpredictable way than they did in 2011. It follows that, in dealing with Russia, the EU should design a strategy addressing elites in the short term and societal forces in the long term. By coupling containment and soft-power measures bypassing the conflict-ridden context, the EU may be better prepared to re-integrate a new democratic Russia into Europe in the future.

## Further Reading

Centre for Social and Labour Rights, *Labour protests in Russia in the first half of 2016. Analytical report on the results of labour protests monitoring* (in Russian), 25 August 2016. Available at: <http://trudprava.ru/expert/analytics/protestanalyt/1712>.

Churakova, O., Mukhametshina, Y., and Kozlov P., 'Russian authorities do not need a high turnout' (in Russian), *Vedomosti*, 13 September 2016. Available at: <http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2016/09/13/656695-yavka-vibori>.

Greene, S., *Moscow in movement: power and opposition in Putin's Russia*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014.

Herszenhorn, D.M., 'Putin orders change in election rules', *The New York Times*, 2 January 2013. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/03/world/europe/putin-orders-new-system-for-russian-parliamentary-elections.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/03/world/europe/putin-orders-new-system-for-russian-parliamentary-elections.html?_r=0).

Korgunyuk, Y., 'Is Churov's ouster really the end of a political era in Russia?', *Russia Direct*, 8 March 2016. Available at: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/churovs-ouster-really-end-political-era-russia-0>.

## About the Authors

**Sofía López Piqueres** is an Academic Assistant in the EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies Department at the College of Europe. She holds an MA in European Interdisciplinary Studies from the College of Europe. Her main research interests include EU enlargement, Soviet and post-Soviet area studies, Ottoman and Turkish studies, gender studies and the Balkans.

**Domenico Valenza** is an Academic Assistant in the European General Studies Programme at the College of Europe. He holds a an MA in European Studies from Université Paris 8 Saint Denis and Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), and a MSc in "Russia in Global Systems" from King's College London (KCL). His main research interests include EU-Russia relations, NATO-Russia relations, European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), human rights and the European social model.

Views expressed in the College of Europe Policy Briefs are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect positions of either the series editors or the College of Europe. Free online subscription at [www.coleurope.eu/CEPOB](http://www.coleurope.eu/CEPOB).