

# An Expat's Guide to the Duma Vote

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United Russia notoriously uses “administrative resources” to stay in power and struggles to ditch the derogative label “the party of crooks and thieves.” **Igor Tabakov**

Russia's political scene has been thoroughly reworked since Vladimir Putin rose to power in 2000, with only seven political parties left in existence, four of which are represented in the State Duma.

Which parties might clear the 7 percent threshold to win seats on Dec. 4 remains anyone's guess, but United Russia, the Communists and the Liberal Democratic Party are good bets.

Potential rivals have been left out in the cold because of draconian registration rules that bar anyone unwanted by the Kremlin — which is, basically, any strong opposition — from running in the elections. The rules work like clockwork: No new party has been registered since Right Cause in 2009, with dozens of registration requests thrown out by the Justice Ministry on mind-numbing technicalities.

Familiarize yourself with the world of Russian politics — or refresh your knowledge — with

this quick guide to all the country's political groups, including those that are banned or unregistered but still play an important role in contemporary politics.

## Parliamentary Parties

### Communist Party



**Who:** 20th-century left

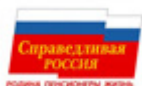
**Platform:** Soviet nostalgia

The Communists are the most powerful opposition force in the country, but they seem to have grown increasingly content over the years with being the eternal second-place party rather than challenging the ruling establishment, which has gradually seized its senior leadership posts in the regions and majorities in local legislatures. The problem boils down to the party's reluctance to modernize its platform by embracing some form of social democracy that could score well with younger voters, both blue- and white-collar. Instead, the party's aging leadership caters to an elderly constituency that still dreams of returning to the glory days of the Soviet Union. Even so, they are the biggest political entity outside the Kremlin's power vertical.

**Chances:**

- VTsIOM (state-owned): 14 percent
- Levada (independent): 20 percent
- Gazeta.ru (online): 18.6 percent

### A Just Russia



**Who:** Kremlin rejects on opposition path

**Platform:** The dark horse

Talk about political drama. A Just Russia was created in 2006 when the Kremlin merged three up-and-coming minor parties to create a new, pro-Kremlin leftist party that would replace the Communists. But party leaders strayed from their path, turning their guns on United Russia instead of the Communists, which resulted in the Kremlin withdrawing support this year. (The party remains fiercely loyal to Vladimir Putin.) Supporters urged the party to go into opposition, but its leadership has sought forgiveness and acceptance from the Kremlin. Now the party is de facto opposition, even though party bosses have not declared an all-out war on their former masters. Support for A Just Russia hovers around the 7 percent threshold for Duma entry, meaning that a slight change in the political winds could have major consequences for the future parliament, including possibly denying United Russia a constitutional majority.

### Chances:

- VTsIOM: 4 percent
- Levada: 7 percent
- Gazeta.ru: 5.8 percent

### United Russia



**Who:** The defending champion

**Platform:** Not the party of crooks and thieves

United Russia is the first party in post-Soviet history to remain in power for more than one Duma term, but that does not mean they have it easy. Most Russians credit the regime with bringing stability to the nation and ensuring steady economic growth, but the ruling party is also held accountable for the regime's shortcomings, including kleptocracy and political and economic stagnation, which especially irks the middle class. United Russia notoriously uses its "administrative resources" to stay in power and struggles to ditch the derogative label "the party of crooks and thieves," slapped onto its back by anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny.

### Chances:

- VTsIOM: 49 percent of the vote
- Levada: 51 percent
- Gazeta.ru: 5.5 percent

### Liberal Democratic Party



**Who:** Fringe national populists

**Platform:** None

Fundamentally a one-man show for founder and leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the Liberal Democrats are neither liberal nor democratic, instead offering an alluring heap of populist slogans, starting with their classic '90s promise that Russian soldiers will wash their boots in the Indian Ocean. Zhirinovskiy is seen as court jester to the nation, which allows him to speak more freely than others. Recently his hobbyhorse has been nationalism, and the party is running for the Duma with the slogan "Liberal Democrats for Russians," a sure

attention-grabber and a dangerous play on the ultranationalists' "Russia for Russians." The party gets away with it because its function is limited to voicing issues, not solving them: They have never voted against the Kremlin on important issues, and both the government and the public know it.

#### Chances:

- VTsIOM: 9 percent
- Levada: 14 percent
- Gazeta.ru: 5 percent

## Nonparliamentary Parties

### Yabloko



**Who:** Comeback hopefuls

**Platform:** Reclusive social democrats

In a political climate where a party's lifespan usually amounts to one Duma term, Yabloko, established in 1993, is a real Methuselah. But it has been slipping into obscurity for a decade, and most voters see its members as has-beens — a fact that was not helped when founder Grigory Yavlinsky recently broke his self-imposed political exile to lead the party in the Duma elections.

Yabloko prides itself on consistency: It has a platform, modeled on European social democrats, with a dual focus on public welfare and human rights, and has stuck with it. But the platform has not exactly caught on with the public: The rights issue draws Russian Reaganites, who prefer a more radical brand of capitalism, while socialist-leaning voters love the Soviet Union and brook no Western nonsense.

The party, however, has refused to compromise, going it alone without allies and polling at 2 percent rather than sacrifice its lofty ideals. This has sealed Yabloko's image as a party of dogmatists out of touch with the real world. Its platform remains as pure as ever, its integrity is sound, and all things considered, it is the best pick around for liberal-minded Kremlin critics. Now it remains for the party to prove that it remains relevant after all these years by crossing that pesky 7 percent threshold.

#### Chances:

- VTsIOM: 1.5 percent
- Levada: 4 percent
- Gazeta.ru: 12.5 percent

### Right Cause



## ПРАВОЕ ДЕЛО

**Who:** Pro-Kremlin liberals

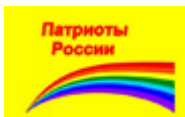
**Platform:** Prokhorov-less

For a split political second, Right Cause looked like a dark horse that just might win. Created in 2008 as a pro-Kremlin party to attract liberals, Right Cause struggled to gain public support until billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov — of New Jersey Nets, Yo-mobile and Courchevel-scandal fame — became its leader in June. Though Right Cause is obviously a government project, the move raised some hopes. Prokhorov was full of energy, and supporters hoped that his pro-business platform could breathe fresh air into Russia's corrupt and monopoly-dominated economy. But then the party's Kremlin-linked bureaucracy ousted him in a lightning-fast coup in September, apparently over his independent streak — the very thing that made him attractive to voters. Since then, support for the party has evaporated.

**Chances:**

- VTsIOM: 1 percent
- Levada: 1 percent
- Gazeta.ru: 4.1 percent

## Patriots of Russia



**Who:** Who?

**Platform:** Not really nationalists

A remnant of Russia's vibrant pre-Putin political scene, Patriots of Russia is a dwarf party with no big names and no platform flashy enough to attract attention. At a time when nationalists — from moderates to neo-fascists — hunger for political representation, the Patriots peddle a bland mix of socialism, which the Communists do better, and tame national pride, which is United Russia's specialty.

They did co-lead massive anti-government protests in Kaliningrad in 2009, which genuinely shook the Kremlin, but this success was a product of the exclave's politics and did not translate into an improved performance on the national level. Patriots of Russia could conceivably fill a nationalist niche, but it has neither the money nor the willpower to really do that, and betting on it to cross the 7 percent threshold would be like betting on Montenegro to win the 2018 World Cup.

## Chances:

- VTsIOM: 0.3 percent
- Levada: below 1 percent
- Gazeta.ru: 1.4 percent

## Unregistered Parties

### Parnas (Party of People's Freedom)



**Who:** Anti-Kremlin liberals

**Platform:** The liberals strike back

Say what you want about Western-style, capitalism-rooted democracy, but it always has had a core of supporters in Russia who will not go away — and Parnas is their latest political vehicle. The group is not afraid to speak out about the government's ailments, especially corruption. Its reports on former Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Putin's tenures in power were even seized by police, in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Admittedly, the isolation of Parnas — it is never featured in the national media, and the Justice Ministry has refused to register it on laughable technicalities — has taken its toll. It does not have a detailed, forward-looking platform, merely saying it is "against" the Kremlin but not really "for" anything, at least in the public eye. It is also prone to internal quarrels, as all Russian liberals before them, and some of its leaders, such as the still-militant Boris Nemtsov, who has been around since the late 1990s, induce fatigue in voters. But still, in a perfect world, Parnas would be the party of choice for those who support constitutional freedoms and the invisible hand of the market.

## Chances:

- VTsIOM: -
- Levada: -
- Gazeta.ru: 11.9 percent

### Rot Front



**Who:** Left with a battle spirit

**Platform:** Workers of the world, unite!

To be honest, Rot Front's social platform is not that different from the Communists'. Just this month, frontman Sergei Udaltsov argued on Dozhd TV that restoring the Soviet Union was not impossible. But unlike the Communists, these guys are real street fighters, and none more so

than Udaltsov, the man with perhaps the most integrity in contemporary Russian politics. He has been detained more than 100 times for his small but hard-hitting rallies against corruption in the Kremlin — and he is still going at it. The group has even shamed the Justice Ministry into trying to ditch its responsibility of registering parties altogether — after the ministry turned down six of its registration requests, each time on a pretext more absurd than the one before. It is hard to say how Rot Front might have fared in the government, but its drive to fight for social justice — whatever way its members understand it — is unmatched by any other group.

#### **Chances:**

- VTsIOM: -
- Levada: -
- Gazeta.ru: 1.4 percent

### **The Other Russia**

#### **Другая Россия**

**Who:** Anti-Kremlin showmen

**Platform:** Against

The undertaking of novelist-turned-politician Eduard Limonov, The Other Russia is not as impressive as some of his past enterprises but is still a force to be reckoned with. Limonov, a truly gifted writer, made ripples on the Russian political scene in the 2000s, which his National Bolshevik Party crashed like a punk at a wedding reception, staging "seizures" of government buildings, pelting officials with eggs and generally exposing the country's politics for the farce it was becoming. But the shock value gradually wore off (harsh government-led prosecution helped), and when the party was banned in 2007, Limonov switched to The Other Russia, billed as a serious entity to bring together all government critics.

The group, which borrowed its title from a now-defunct movement by another Kremlin basher, Garry Kasparov, has made some headway with its regular Strategy 31 protests, in which its members rally in city squares on the 31st day of each month without being granted permission from the authorities to mark Article 31 of the Constitution, which upholds freedom of assembly. While photogenic, this has proved too vague for mainstream voters to associate with. The party's platform has faced the same problem: "Left-Right Centrism" is not really a meaningful slogan. Then again, its real program is simply all things anti-Kremlin, so it is a good pick for anyone thinking that Putin must leave power and everything else can be sorted out after that.

#### **Chances:**

- VTsIOM: -
- Levada: -
- Gazeta.ru: 3.1 percent

## Rodina-Congress of Russian Communities



**Who:** Cautious nationalists

**Platform:** For Putin and the Fatherland

Dmitry Rogozin was the brightest politician to emerge in Russia in the early 2000s, but he came at a bad time. After taking over Rodina, a second-tier socialist party created by the Kremlin just two months before the 2003 Duma elections, he transformed it into a powerful electoral force that capitalized on rising nationalist sentiment and won seats in the parliament. As Rodina's popularity grew, however, the Kremlin got scared. The party was merged into A Just Russia, Rogozin awarded a sinecure as Russian envoy to NATO, and things went quiet for several years.

But Rogozin, a natural-born populist, was apparently tired of Brussels, and he tried to stage a comeback this election cycle, engaging in behind-the-scenes talks with United Russia and re-establishing Rodina, this time as a patriot-minded public group, not a party. The talk in the corridors was that he would step back into politics to sweep the nationalist vote — either for United Russia or his own new, still hypothetical, party — but that he asked for too much (a deputy speaker seat), and the deal did not pan out.

However, Rodina-Congress of Russian Communities — which lay dormant for years but was resurrected and successfully registered as an NGO this spring — could represent a unique political force that is both pro-Kremlin and fiercely nationalist. Speeches by its members are full of promises to defend the Russian nation from unidentified (possibly Caucasus-based) oppressors. Whether such a hybrid is viable will remain unknown this election cycle.

**Chances:**

- VTsIOM: -
- Levada: -
- Gazeta.ru: -

## Movement Against Illegal Immigration



**Who:** Outspoken nationalists

**Platform:** Russia for Russians

Russian nationalists never had a mainstream political representation, but the Movement Against Illegal Immigration came the closest, if only because its required reading list did not include "Mein Kampf" or "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." That is not to say the group is soft. It has combined carefully calculated rhetoric with actual street activity, rushing to get



involved in anti-Chechen riots in the Karelian town of Kondopoga in 2006, and co-establishing the annual nationalist Russian March on Nov. 4 — not to mention pickets, information campaigns and even providing legal help to nationalists or simple "Slavs" involved in interethnic court squabbles. The group's migrant bashing, while only in words, still proved too hard-hitting, and it was banned in August on extremist charges. But the Movement Against Illegal Immigration remains the most consistent and effective group to have campaigned for the rights of the "title nation" and "Russia for Russians."

**Chances:**

- VTsIOM: -
- Levada: -
- Gazeta.ru: -

**None of the above**

**Who:** -

**Platform:** -

This was the candidate gaining popularity the fastest on the ballots in the 2000s — so much so that it was eliminated by the Kremlin, which was quick to realize that "None of the above" hurt the authorities more than any of the opposition parties that voters chose to snub. It allowed voters to check if they simply did not like the way things were going in Russia and to root for a complete reload of the political deck.

**Chances:**

- VTsIOM: 21 percent\*
- Levada: 11 percent\*\*
- Gazeta.ru: 17.2 percent

\*Respondents who will not attend the elections.

\*\*Respondents who profess "strong absence of interest" in the elections.

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