

Putin Promises Russians Billions in Spending Ahead of Polls

By [Evan Gershkovich for AFP](#)

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The ruling, pro-Kremlin United Russia party aims to overcome widespread unpopularity and keep its majority in the State Duma. **Kremlin.ru**

President Vladimir Putin proposed Saturday at his United Russia party congress billions of rubles in spending ahead of September parliamentary polls that could see the deeply unpopular party struggle.

Addressing several hundred of his mostly mask-wearing and socially-distanced loyalists in a Moscow convention center as the capital set a pandemic high for new Covid cases for the second straight day, Putin proposed deploying billions towards social support.

This included 50 billion rubles (\$687 million) on public transport, 30 billion rubles for repairing roads and 20 billion rubles to clean up rivers, among other spending projects on infrastructure and healthcare.

"The program of the party of the leader has to be the program of the people," the 68-year-old Kremlin chief said in a speech broadcast on state television.

He also said the state would be allocating payments and new forms of support for families starting next month.

"Our task is to significantly increase the prosperity of Russian families and the incomes of our citizens," Putin said.

The gathering, which determines the ruling party's candidates and electoral platform for September's lower house of parliament vote, comes after the party has seen support tumble in recent years amid economic stagnation, entrenched corruption and widespread voter fatigue.

On Friday, state-run pollster VTsIOM published a survey showing that 30% of voters support United Russia — a 10-point drop from the last lower house State Duma elections in 2016.

Navalny neutralized

But the party, which controls a majority of the State Duma, is projecting calm.

"It is a good base of support that can be further increased during the election campaign," party chairman and former president and prime minister Dmitry Medvedev said at the start of the month.

Putin, who came to power in 2000, himself boasts much higher support than his party with an approval rating of 61.5%, according to VTsIOM.

The pollster also predicts that three opposition parties that are seen as doing the Kremlin's bidding — the nationalist LDPR, the Communists and A Just Russia — will garner around 30% of the vote.

Further buoying the Kremlin's prospects in September is the recent dismantling of the movement of Russia's main opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

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Barring his organizations from working in the country, a Moscow court earlier this month branded them as "extremist," while Putin signed legislation outlawing staff, members and sponsors of "extremist" groups from running in parliamentary elections.

Critics say the moves were aimed at ensuring that Navalny, who was jailed earlier this year for two-and-a-half years on old fraud charges he says are politically motivated, does not spoil September's vote for the Kremlin.

Despite the clampdown, Navalny's allies are promoting his Smart Voting strategy that backs candidates best placed to defeat Kremlin-linked politicians — a tactic that has seen United Russia lose a number of seats in recent local elections.

'All opponents in prison'

But less known opposition candidates that Smart Voting could help prop up have faced pressure too.

Police this month have arrested at least two municipal lawmakers and one pro-democracy activist who had declared their intentions to run.

Meanwhile, opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov fled to Ukraine after he said sources close to the Kremlin told him he would be arrested if he did not leave.

Critics also claim that authorities will rig the vote in their favor in September.

On Friday, Russia's elections chief announced the parliamentary polls would be staggered from Sept. 17 to Sept. 19 to limit the spread of coronavirus.

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Last summer, after authorities held a constitutional referendum over one week, independent election monitor Golos said it had received hundreds of complaints of violations including multiple voting and intimidation.

The opposition said the multi-day nature of the referendum — which paved the way for Putin to stay in power until 2036 — gave election officials greater opportunities to fix the vote as the ballots were held overnight.

At Saturday's congress, Putin told his party that they must make sure September's elections are conducted fairly and legally.

"Open battle and honest win, hello? You put all your opponents in prison," tweeted Navalny aide Georgy Albuov.

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