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Putin Urges Russians to Vote After Critics Barred From Election

By AFP

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A United Russia party campaign poster reading "Together with the country, with Moscow, with the United Russia" in central Moscow. **Alexander Nemenov / AFP**

President Vladimir Putin on Thursday urged Russians to vote in parliamentary elections later this week in which most vocal Kremlin critics have been barred from running.

"I count on your responsible, balanced, patriotic civic position," Putin said in a video address published overnight on the Kremlin website.

Putin's United Russia party is widely expected to retain its majority in the lower house State Duma after the election.

Serious Kremlin critics — including allies of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny — have been barred from running in the vote, which is taking place over three days from Friday to Sunday.

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Navalny, Putin's best-known domestic opponent, is behind bars on old fraud charges, and his organizations were banned earlier this year.

Ahead of the vote, Navalny's team has promoted a "Smart Voting" campaign that tells supporters which candidate they should back to vote out Kremlin-aligned politicians.

A majority of the candidates named by Navalny's allies on Wednesday are running on the Communist Party's list.

Russian authorities have also amped up pressure on foreign tech giants in the run-up to the vote, accusing U.S.-based companies of interfering in the polls.

Last week, the state media watchdog said it blocked the website dedicated to Navalny's tactical voting and it has pressured Google and Apple to delete "Smart Voting" apps from their marketplaces.

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The vote will see lawmakers elected to the 450-member lower house State Duma, where United Russia currently holds 334 seats.

Putin has been self-isolating since Tuesday and canceled all in-person events after dozens of people in his inner circle tested positive for the coronavirus.

It is unclear how he will take part in the elections through a widely promoted system for casting electronic ballots is in place.

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