The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Messy Playing Field for United Russia

By Nikolai Petrov

September 06, 2010



Russia can expect plenty of political turbulence this fall.

The regional elections in October are only a month away, and the outcome will be crucial for both United Russia and the sanctioned opposition. In the last regional elections in March, United Russia lost 10 to 15 percentage points, along with its absolute majority in many regional legislatures. Now United Russia must prove that it can win votes under much more difficult conditions.

United Russia has mounted a serious effort to improve its results this time around. All the regional campaigns are being managed from Moscow, a number of State Duma deputies and Federation Council senators are included on the regional lists, and they have been warned that their election results will have a direct impact on their political careers.

But there is a limit to how much the authorities can influence the vote. Current economic, social and political conditions are more likely to push voters toward opposition candidates than the party of power.

If the October elections turn out like those held in March — that is, without blatant cases of falsification but generally unfair in terms of the abuse of Kremlin administrative resources — then United Russia's standing will not only fail to improve, but will probably fall.

That means the Kremlin has two possible courses of action: either to intensify the use of its administrative resources to ensure the desired candidate wins, or to try to come to terms with a new political landscape that includes a larger presence of opposition parties in regional political bodies.

Both of those options are fraught with problems. There is a limit to how far the authorities can go in announcing election results that do not reflect the actual will of the people. During the October 2009 elections, that approach provoked a sharp reaction from the three nominally opposition parties in the Duma — A Just Russia, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party — that felt they had been backed into a corner. At the same time, though, rejecting the model of a single dominant party could lead to a split among the political elite with some members gravitating toward alternatives to United Russia. In any case, it makes for a messy, complicated and potentially dangerous playing field, and the Kremlin, of course, prefers simple political frameworks that it can control.

If United Russia really gets desperate, it might hold early Duma elections before the party's popularity drops too far.

It is very possible that this October, the political elite will finally settle on its strategy for the next decade. And it is no coincidence that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has been especially active during the last week with folksy, whistle stop-style campaigning tactics, such as traveling the Far East in a Lada Kalina, or when he sat down with a dozen or so railroad workers in the Aksenovo-Zilovskoye village in the Zabaikalsky region and promised them that they would be relocated from their current dilapidated housing.

In the end, if Putin and the Kremlin adopt a new political model, this could mean the complete transformation of President Dmitry Medvedev into a lame duck. It could make early elections a more likely scenario.

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