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Election Watchdog Sees Apathy, Tricks

By Natalya Krainova

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Early campaigning for next month's regional and municipal elections has been tarnished by dirty electioneering by United Russia and public apathy, the country's only independent elections watchdog, Golos, said Monday.

Violations listed by Golos include use of administrative resources, registration refusals for opposition candidates and the placement on party lists of high-profile candidates who do not intend to sit in legislatures after the elections.

"The authorities continue to liquidate normal [civil] institutions and create substitutes," Golos official Alexander Kynev said at a news conference attended by only six reporters and no cameramen.

But this trend is ignored by voters, said Lilia Shibanova, executive director of Golos.

"The voters' reaction to what happens during elections is total apathy," she said.

Of the seven registered parties, the ruling United Russia will be the frontrunner in all elections, while A Just Russia and the Communists will win seats in nearly all elected bodies, Golos officials said.

The Liberal Democratic Party only stands a chance in the Chelyabinsk city legislative elections and the Right Cause in Kostroma regional legislature, while Yabloko and Patriots of Russia are unlikely to win any seats at all, they said.

Kynev accused the authorities of further rolling back democracy by reducing the number of regional lawmakers — especially full-time lawmakers — in the next legislatures, making the legislatures "less independent and less professional."

He also identified the Imperiali system, which provides a disproportionate number of seats to election winners to the detriment of other parties, as a problem. The system, already introduced at regional elections, is now to be implemented at municipal elections nationwide as well.

Other anti-democratic trends include abolishing direct mayoral elections in favor of hiring city managers, Shibanova said.

The sole positive point in the elections is the fact that candidates are allowed to run as independents in single-mandate districts, which makes it easier for opposition activists not affiliated with parties to participate, Shibanova said.

A total of 7,850 elections will take place nationwide Oct. 10, including for regional legislatures in the Tuva republic and the regions of Belgorod, Kostroma, Magadan, Novosibirsk and Chelyabinsk.

Mayors for Samara and Makhachkala will also be elected the same day. But the cities of Izhevsk, Kazan, Kaluga, Nizhny Novgorod, Orenburg, Tambov and Cheboksary will get hired city managers instead of elected mayors.

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