The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

United Russia in Key Test for Votes

By Alexandra Odynova

March 10, 2011

A nervous campaign that saw activists and politicians pelted with farm produce or just simply beaten will culminate Sunday when more than 3,000 regional elections will be held across the country.

There is little doubt that the defending champion, United Russia, will protect its sway over local legislatures, but the party, faced with sliding public support, is worried about underperforming.

Sunday's vote will be the last test of party strength before State Duma elections in December, and United Russia has to prove to the Kremlin that it can still win by a landslide in an increasingly hostile political environment.

Among other elections, seats in 12 regional legislatures are up for grabs, including in the regions of Kursk, Kirov, Orenburg, Tambov, Kaliningrad, Nizhny Novgorod and Tver, the Chukotka and Khanty-Mansiisk autonomous districts and the republics of Dagestan, Adygeya and Komi.

All polls indicate that United Russia will lead the vote, but its results may slip below 50 percent for the first time in years — a likelihood that is raising the opposition's fears of vote-rigging and other dirty tricks.

A late February poll by state-run VTsIOM gave United Russia 48 percent, followed by the Communists with 8 percent, the Liberal Democratic Party with 7 percent and A Just Russia with 6 percent. The survey, which had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points, asked about the State Duma elections, not the regional vote, but is nevertheless widely believed to be indicative of the parties' chances on Sunday.

Data by independent Levada pollster show that United Russia has actually improved its ratings, which slipped in January due to a rise in utilities tariffs but bounced back last month. United Russia's support averages 60 percent nationwide, followed by the Communist Party with 12 percent and A Just Russia with 4 percent.

This does not mean candidates will score similar results Sunday, Levada researcher Denis Volkov said. Public discontent with United Russia will not necessarily translate into votes for the opposition.

"The picture can differ from region to region depending on the social and economic situation," Volkov said by telephone. "But surveys show that those who really disagree [with the political situation in Russia] won't go to the polls at all."

A survey conducted by United Russia itself showed that it would only cross the 50 percent threshold in eight of the 12 regions to elect legislatures on Sunday, Vedomosti reported last week. The highest results were shown in Dagestan, with 58 percent, and Chukotka, with 56 percent. The lowest were in the Kursk and Kaliningrad regions, with about 45 percent each, the report said.

United Russia's position is most shaky in the Tver and Kirov regions, said Alexei Titkov, an analyst with the Institute for Regional Politics.

Kaliningrad also poses an uphill battle for United Russia after the opposition led thousands of people to rally in the streets last year to protest an unpopular governor who was eventually removed, said Nikolai Petrov, a regional analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

But with no other party offering a serious challenge to United Russia, the ruling party's "main competitor at the elections will be its own result," Titkov said by telephone Wednesday.

The party is routinely accused of unfair electioneering. Few cases have reached court, but President Dmitry Medvedev did reprimand United Russia over a 2009 regional vote that opposition parties said was shamelessly rigged.

Now United Russia faces a dual task because it has to perform as well as before and at the same time maintain at least a semblance of fair play, analysts said.

United Russia needs to prove to the Kremlin that it can secure its majority of about 65 percent during the State Duma vote "without significant violations," Petrov said.

This would show the Kremlin that it doesn't need to deal with other parties, he said.

For its campaign strategy, United Russia appears to be aiming for high voting results, not a sterling reputation, analysts said.

"The ruling party still holds a monopoly in access to the mass media and administrative resources," Volkov said.

Golos, the country's only independent elections watchdog, said opinion polls have rattled regional officials and left them nervous about losing their jobs over unsatisfactory election results.

"We have observed very aggressive campaigning, which reveals the nervousness of the regional administrative officials," said Golos deputy head Grigory Melkonyants.

Some of the more colorful campaign trail shenanigans occurred in Kursk, where Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov was pelted with a sack of feathers and Kirill Cherkasov, a State Duma deputy with the Liberal Democrats, was struck on the head with a bag of eggs.

The fight is not one-sided, though, with several United Russia activists being severely beaten by unknown attackers in Perm. Senior party official Sergei Neverov complained Thursday that United Russia's opponents were campaigning "very aggressively" against the party, RIA-Novosti reported.

A large number of independent candidates also have dropped out in recent weeks, continuing a tradition established at previous elections where wildcards are removed to clear the way for trusted party candidates, Melkonyants said.

A total of 51,303 candidates were registered for the elections, with the biggest group of about 20,000 supported by United Russia, the Central Elections Commission said. Some 4,300 candidates were removed from the race for various reasons.

The liberal Yabloko opposition party suffered the worst damage, losing 45 percent of its nominees. United Russia's losses amounted to a mere 0.8 percent of its candidates.

More than 14 percent of the independents were also weeded out by election officials, and the nonparliamentary Patriots of Russia party lost 20 percent of nominees.

Yabloko petitioned the Kremlin over its losses last month, but no action followed.

"Violations are everywhere," Melkonyants said.

He said Golos' hotline has been fielding a steady flow of reports about various election-related incidents, including photo and video footage documenting purported foul play.

Even the head of the Central Elections Commission, Vladimir Churov, has acknowledged that parties are using wild and lawless methods worthy of "the far West prairies," RIA-Novosti reported.

Elections commission secretary Nikolai Konkin said Thursday that the parties should draw the line somewhere and publicly agree on "acceptable" campaigning methods for the State Duma elections. But, in an indication of high tensions, the proposal hung in the air, with no

party weighing in on the idea.

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