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United Russia Wins Regional Vote, But Unconvincingly

By Alexandra Odynova

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United Russia scored an unconvincing victory in Sunday's regional vote, leaving analysts in doubt about whether it could perform better in the decisive battle for the State Duma in December.

Preliminary results showed that the ruling party swept most of the 3,300 elections held in 74 regions on Sunday but had the support of less than half the population, with an average 46 percent of the vote, according to preliminary results released Monday.

United Russia's time-honed electioneering strategies are becoming less effective, said regional analyst Rostislav Turovsky, referring to the use of so-called administrative resources, pressure on state employees to go to polls and vote "the right way," and, most important, capitalizing on the popularity of party leader and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The regional elections, the last big vote before the Duma poll, indicate that United Russia

faces an uphill battle in the next campaign, said Turovsky, director of the Agency of Regional Research.

The election results are "a serious warning for the party, reflecting an increasing mood to protest in the regions," said Alexei Makarkin, a political analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

But United Russia still has a chance to do better next time, Makarkin said by telephone.

The party's main asset — Putin's popularity — will be more useful during the federal elections than the regional polls, which are more influenced by local issues, he said.

Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev have authorized United Russia to use their images but participated little in actual campaigning.

"A key role will be played by Putin," Makarkin said. "If he agrees to lead the campaign, United Russia will see a very different result, a higher one."

Turovsky, however, noted that Putin made several trips to regions but this did not help the party in more problematic spots like Kirov, which he visited in February. United Russia received its lowest results in any of the 12 regional legislative elections in Kirov, with 36.7 percent, followed by Tver, with 39.8 percent.

"We can't say the party's results are all bad, but they are far from what they strive for," Turovsky said.

Indeed, United Russia's underperformance is relative: It swept majorities in all 12 regional legislatures that were up for grabs. In addition to Kirov and Tver, the list includes the regions of Kursk, Orenburg, Tambov, Kaliningrad and Nizhny Novgorod, the Chukotka and Khanty-Mansiisk autonomous districts and the republics of Dagestan, Adygeya and Komi.

United Russia won 375, or 70 percent, of all seats in regional legislatures, the Central Elections Commission said Monday. The Communists came a distant second with 71 mandates (13 percent) followed by A Just Russia with 48 mandates and the Liberal Democratic Party with 33.

Of the three parties not represented in the State Duma, only the Patriots of Russia managed to score, winning 10 seats in regional legislatures. Liberal Yabloko and Right Cause won nothing.

The turnout increased 3 to 5 percent in most regions compared with the last elections, the Central Elections Commission said, without elaborating.

Putin put on a brave face Monday, telling journalists that the party's performance was "considerably satisfactory" and its average nationwide support had actually grown by 0.2 percent compared with the 2007 vote in the same regions.

"It means that people, despite being tired, evaluate United Russia's activity in a positive way and express with their votes a hope that the situation will change," Putin said during a visit to Tomsk, Interfax reported.

He avoided mentioning that the vote results showed a sharp drop in United Russia's popularity next to the State Duma elections in 2007. Compared with the last Duma vote, United Russia lost about 20 percent of the vote in most regions that elected legislatures on Sunday, except for Chukotka and Dagestan.

In an indirect acknowledgment of the problem, Putin said United Russia will consider firing party officials in regions where its performance dropped even by 1 percent.

Medvedev did not comment on the vote Monday.

A senior Communist Party official said on Ekho Moskvy radio that his party "sees a tendency in reinforcing its influence, while United Russia is gradually losing ground."

Boris Gryzlov, who heads United Russia's Duma faction, said he was sure the party would win the December vote. But he also conceded that the party did not perform to its full potential, Interfax said.

Chukotka was United Russia main success, with the party getting 71 percent of the vote amid unusually high turnout of 80 percent that critics said was due to voters being presented with free tickets to a pop concert held on election day.

Billionaire Roman Abramovich was elected to the Chukotka legislature as an independent with 92 percent of the vote. Abramovich used to govern the Arctic region and is fondly remembered by locals for his generous investments.

Billionaire Alexander Lebedev also was elected as an independent lawmaker to a Kirov district legislature.

While United Russia scored only 36.7 percent there, it will nevertheless control the legislature thanks to candidates elected in single-mandate constituencies, not on party lists.

In Tver, United Russia scored 39.8 percent compared with 59 percent in 2007.
The Communists collected 24.6 percent, and A Just Russia got 21.3 percent.

Dagestan delivered perhaps the biggest surprise of the campaign, with the Patriots of Russia finishing second with 11.5 percent of the vote. United Russia maintained a strong lead with 67 percent.

The vote was marked by increased turnout and took place in a "quiet atmosphere" with few violations, Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov said, according to Interfax.

But Golos, the country's sole independent election watchdog, said its violations hotline received the biggest number of complaints since 2008.

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