

Intrigue Draws Focus to Yaroslavl Mayor Race

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March 29, 2012

The  Moscow Times

This April Fools' Day, the joke could be on United Russia as Yaroslavl voters head to the polls for a mayoral runoff election.

Opposition parties and groups have thrown their support behind Yevgeny Urlashov, a municipal deputy with a law background — and until September, a member of United Russia.

The runoff in the city of 600,000 will be the first major test for the ruling party since its disputed win in the December State Duma elections.

Outrage over accusations that United Russia rigged those elections to ensure victory gave rise to a sustained opposition movement.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin salvaged some dignity for United Russia by convincingly

defeating a handful of challengers in the March 4 presidential election.

Putin won more than 60 percent of the vote, although reports from an assortment of groups charged that his margin of victory was inflated by vote fraud.

The contest in Yaroslavl has already turned into a tough battle between a United Russia-backed tycoon and a former party member now running as independent.

Urlashov, 45, is a lawyer by profession. Although he doesn't consider himself "Putin's foe," he wants to change the budgetary relationship between the city and federal authorities so that more money is allocated for the crumbling utilities sector.

That strategy has worked for Urlashov so far. He won the election's first round in March, receiving 40 percent of the vote.

His rival, Yakov Yakushev, got 27 percent. That forced a runoff, since neither candidate won a majority.

"Yaroslavl locals are showing their anger with the authorities because the authorities don't respect them. And they feel it," said Anatoly Greshnevikov, head of A Just Russia's Yaroslavl branch and a supporter of Urlashov.

"I assume turnout will be about 60 percent, and the most important thing will be to conduct a full-scale monitoring," said a source in the elections commission office in Yaroslavl who asked that his name not be used.

Opposition activists said Sunday that everything will depend on the independent election monitors who are volunteering to keep an eye on the process.

Among them will be representatives of the independent elections watchdog Golos.

Gazeta.ru reported Wednesday that local hotels were jam-packed with Russian and foreign journalists planning to cover the event.

The second round might prove difficult for Urlashov because his campaign has been hampered by a lack of funding and resources, making it tough for him to put out his message on local television.

The situation is much different for Yakushev, owner of Yaroslavskiye Kraski, a nationally known company that produces paint.

"There are a lot of posters for Yakushev and very few for Urlashov," said Julia, a local teacher. She did not give her last name.

Soon after the March election, the incumbent mayor, Viktor Volonchunas, made Yakushev his deputy, a move intended to give Yakushev administrative support, experts said.

Despite his business success, Yakushev is called a "local oligarch" by Yaroslavl residents.

And his association with United Russia, which suffered a huge loss of Duma seats during the parliamentary elections, could be detrimental.

Support for United Russia in the Yaroslavl region in those elections was less than 30 percent, the lowest in the country.

Until last year, Urlashov also was a member of United Russia.

He said his decision to leave the party was prompted by the September crash of an airplane carrying the Lokomotiv hockey team during takeoff from Yaroslavl airfield.

The crash caused the deaths of 43 people, most of them Russian and foreign hockey players for Lokomotiv.

Urlashov, an avid fan of the team, said soon afterward that the tragedy might have resulted from the hasty decisions forced on a nervous pilot.

At the time, the tarmac was full of the planes of dignitaries arriving for the Global Policy Forum, which was chaired by President Dmitry Medvedev.

Urlashov later told reporters that he had been pressured by party elders to retract his statements. Investigators eventually concluded that the crash was caused by human error.

Just Russia party official Greshnevikov believes that authorities in Yaroslavl are trying to prevent Urlashov from winning.

He pointed to the nearby city of Tutayev, where the opposition believes numerous violations occurred in the mayoral election.

The elections commission in Tutayev declared United Russia-backed candidate Sergei Levashov the winner despite the fact that he and opposition candidate Andrei Minin were separated by only three votes.

Minin was also subjected to intimidation. On the eve of the election, someone fired shots at him.

Minin said the shooting was an attempt "to scare people away from the election."

"We live like [people] in some remote African country with no respect for the law," Greshnevikov said.

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