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Post-Election Petropavlovsk

By Julia Phillips

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The night after the election, five thousand miles from the Kremlin, Katya leaped away from the dining hall table in disgust. Someone had just mentioned Putin's win. Her movement made utensils clatter. "We had no choice," she shouted. "We had no choice! All of us around Moscow, we youth, those who go to the protests, we couldn't vote because there was no one to vote for." The group sharing dinner scraped their plates. A photographer living in Tver, Katya had flown east across eight time zones to visit Kamchatka, a territory the size of California that greets every new morning while the rest of the country sleeps. She came bearing news of speeches, rallies, rage. "We had no choice," she repeated, then took her seat again. Her words thudded into the hall. The Russian word for "election" translates literally to "choices." We had no election, she might have been saying, we had no election. It would have sounded true.

Ringed by volcanoes, jutting into the Pacific, and only recently opened to visitors after decades as a Soviet military base, Kamchatka to most Russians is as distant as a fairy tale. Three hundred thousand people live in a few scattered settlements studding this peninsula's fantastic landscape. The region's capital, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, is not like Moscow. It's

not even like Novosibirsk. It's a set of five-story cement buildings cracked by constant earthquakes, with a population supported by commercial fishing, summer tourism, and the military-industrial complex.

Between the lava, geysers, ice fields, and brown bears that roam the peninsula like its guard dogs, Kamchatka could not seem more distant from the protests that blistered across the rest of the country this winter. In the months leading up to the election, billboards bearing Putin's initials were erected along the peninsula. Construction teams stamped with the United Russia logo repaired the pitted Petropavlovsk roads. Though images of the Moscow protestors hardly load on the peninsula's sluggish Internet and are rarely seen, the once and future president's influence is felt across the width of this country—and with his image, dissatisfaction extends. Three weeks before the election, a philosophy professor sat in a dark middle-school gym in the city. He and his friends had finished a late game of soccer and were drinking to wrap up the night. Conversation turned to the election, and the professor announced he'd be voting for Zyuganov, the Communist candidate. "Why?" someone asked.

"He's not Putin."

"But what is there about Zyuganov to support? Why him?"

"I don't know," the professor said, and bowed his head to his beer. "I don't want Putin. Zyuganov's not Putin. Isn't that enough?" For most voters, it wasn't. Beyond United Russia, there was no choice.

Election day came silent and snowy. Police officers and middle-aged blonde women sat behind narrow tables in schools, libraries, and government buildings, handing out ballots and waiting for the polls to close. Where in December, the parliamentary elections had been crowded with vendors of books and toys, March 4 found polling places mostly empty. A lone vendor of baked goods crossed her arms in one Petropavlovsk hall. New electric ballot boxes flashed green and whirred. The web camera mounted somewhere on the ceiling sent a slow feed via the Kamchatkan satellite to Moscow, where polls had not yet opened, where a whole city was just waking up. From a poster of the presidential candidates taped to the wall, Putin watched the day end on this edge of Russia. Kamchatka gradually readied for sleep. There might as well have been no elections at all.

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