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Don't Expect an October Revolution

By Nikolai Petrov

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With the recent resignation of Ryazan Governor Oleg Kovalyov, five regions — Amur, Belgorod, Bryansk, Novgorod and Ryazan — are now set to hold gubernatorial elections on Oct. 14, the first regions to do so since 2004. The Kremlin closely screened the regions and decided to permit elections only where no surprises were expected with election results. And shortly after the new law that partially returned direct gubernatorial elections became effective July 1, Moscow reappointed governors wherever the incumbents were politically weak or the regions were strategically important. The most interesting developments now will be the likely changes to the recent law on gubernatorial elections. This is particularly true for regions where the business and political elite are itching for greater independence.

Regarding the law on electing governors, it is likely that the current system of three filters will be deemed superfluous and politically impractical. Those filters include a requirement for candidates to collect the signatures of 5 to 10 percent of all municipal deputies; to obtain support from 75 percent of the municipalities of the given region; or document support from 90 to 95 percent of the rank-and-file rural deputies. Such a system not only aggravates the opposition and fails to vent mounting social pressure, but it also strengthens the position

of incumbent governors. They are likely to increase pressure on the Kremlin to repeat the example of Ryazan, giving them the chance to be re-elected while the situation is relatively favorable. Meanwhile, the political life in the regions will likely become more dynamic, perhaps even to the point where politicians will pass votes of no confidence in their governors.

Apart from the gubernatorial elections, legislative assemblies will be elected in six other regions in October: Penza, Saratov, Sakhalin, Krasnodar and the republics of Udmurtia and North Ossetia. With the authorities keeping a tight rein on the situation, no surprises are expected, with the possible exception of Sakhalin. Even in the Krasnodar region, where the recent floods and allegations of negligence by the authorities could lead to a backlash vote against United Russia, the government is expected to declare the usual results of more than 60 percent.

United Russia politicians are bracing for possible defeat in elections for city legislatures in Barnaul, Vladivostok, Yekaterinburg, Kursk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Tver, Cherkessk and Yaroslavl, as well as in the mayoral race in Kaliningrad. These are the cities where the current political system is being tested for strength. The authorities face two problems in these cities: voters who are very critical of the government, especially in the major regional centers, and much greater transparency and public attention, which makes it difficult to employ the kinds of electoral manipulations used in the past. The relatively strong results for strong persons backed by United Russia in past mayoral races in Krasnoyarsk and Omsk cannot be extended to party lists in, say, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok, where the ruling party has lost authority. That is why all attention should be focused primarily on municipal elections.

The paradox is that the Kremlin might later conclude that the elections in these dozen regions were relatively successful and that no serious political reforms are therefore necessary. If that happens, it will be a huge mistake and a direct path to political ruin.

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