

Why the Kremlin Is Still Afraid of Elections

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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Regional elections, which will be held in less than two weeks, will be the first since the State Duma elections last December that sparked the mass protest movement. They are important for the opposition and for society as a whole. Both are rousing from a state of lethargy and calling for a more open, fair and competitive political system and for the authorities to heed its demands.

The authorities are afraid of elections. They are even more afraid of the scandals resulting from the Kremlin's manipulation of elections, including large protests in Moscow. They are therefore making large-scale use of administrative resources to ensure electoral victory without having to resort to widespread falsification again. This is the same tactic used in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the presidential election in March.

The newest element in this electoral cycle is the first direct election of governors since 2005, five in all. The introduction of a "filter" at the municipal level not only allowed the authorities

to reduce the number of candidates to three or four in each race but, more important, to cull out unwanted candidates.

As a result, the Kremlin-friendly incumbents are favored in each election. They are expected to win by a large margin in the Amur, Belgorod and Novgorod regions, but they will encounter some difficulties in the Bryansk and Ryazan regions.

The race in Ryazan is especially important. That was where a strong candidate first appeared from a spoiler party, the Patriots of Russia. He challenged the unpopular gubernatorial candidate and won support from some members of the local political elite before unexpectedly withdrawing his candidacy in exchange for a cushy senatorial post.

United Russia can count on a fair degree of success in these elections because it allowed voting only in those regions in which it already enjoys majority support and split the electorate in other regions by means of spoiler parties.

No particular surprises are expected in the six regions slated to hold legislative elections, despite several novel circumstances in the campaigns. Those include a large list of parties — from 11 to 17 — because of the emergence of new parties and the annulment of the previous rule obligating political parties to collect a large number of signatures to register.

The most interesting elections promise to be those for the municipal legislatures in Barnaul, Vladivostok, Kursk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Tver, Cherkassk and Yaroslavl and for mayor in Kaliningrad, Nizhny Tagil and Khimki. In these cities, there may be some surprises, including a poor showing by United Russia.

Overall, the authorities have responded to protesters' demands for a more competitive and transparent political process by employing ever more sophisticated tricks to retain their hold on power.

An old Soviet-era joke relates how Leonid Brezhnev responded when he was told that the train he was riding had to stop and could go no further. He ordered that the curtains be closed and that the wagon be rocked from side to side to create the illusion that the train was moving forward.

It seems the current regime is taking the same approach. Politically speaking, it has also stopped dead in its tracks.

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