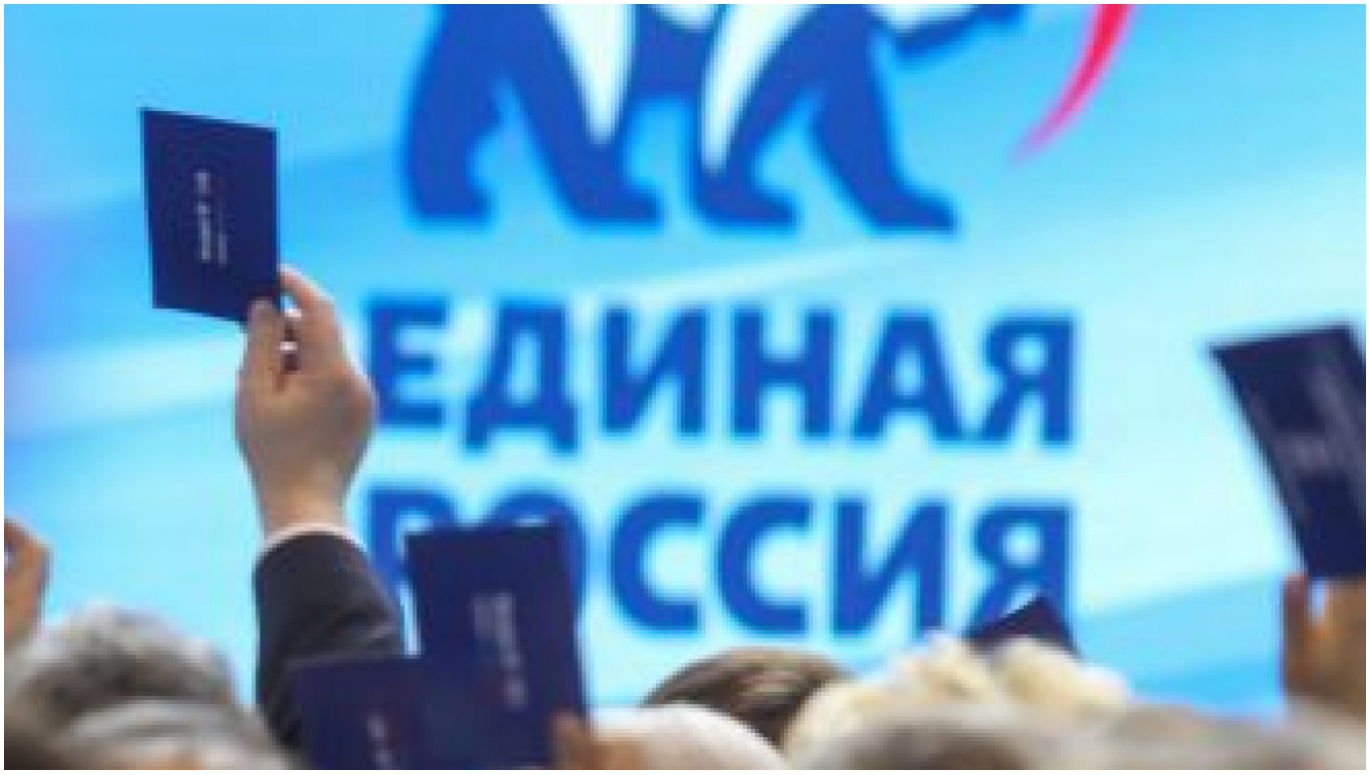
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Horse-Trading Positions Kremlin Allies to Win Gubernatorial Races

By Alexander Bratersky

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Other regional elections have also seen last-minute candidate withdrawals, which in many cases have been the apparent product of United Russia's efforts to secure key leadership posts. **Maxim Stulov**

Three candidates running for mayor in the Moscow region town of Khimki announced Tuesday that they will withdraw from the high-profile race, one of dozens of local and regional elections slated for Sunday that include the first gubernatorial elections since 2005.

Igor Belousov, a former Khimki deputy mayor who became an opposition supporter, said he has decided to quit the race and back acting Mayor Oleg Shakhov, who is supported by the ruling United Russia party. Also exiting the race is Yury Babak, a candidate from the obscure Cities of Russia party who said he would also support Shakhov.

The third person to abandon his candidacy Tuesday was Alexander Romanovich of the Just Russia party. Without elaborating, Romanovich said actions by the regional administration

were preventing him from running a proper campaign, the party said in a statement.

Other regional elections, including several of the gubernatorial votes, have also seen last-minute candidate withdrawals. In many cases, they have been the apparent product of horse-trading by political elites aimed at assuring that Kremlin-friendly candidates win the regional leadership posts.

Sunday's gubernatorial votes in the Bryansk, Ryazan, Belgorod, Novgorod and Amur regions, the first since direct elections for governors were reinstated earlier this year, are seen as a critical test for the Kremlin.

The reinstatement of gubernatorial elections was viewed as part of a Kremlin attempt to appease participants of large-scale protests that broke out in December following State Duma elections, which the opposition said were tarnished by falsifications.

Direct gubernatorial elections had been abolished by President Vladimir Putin in 2004.

A majority of voters think elected governors will make a difference in their regions, according to a recent Levada Center poll. Sixty-seven percent of respondents to the survey said elected governors would care more about regional problems than those appointed by the president.

But 39 percent of people surveyed said they supported "presidential filters," a proposal that would include a requirement for political parties to consult with the president before nominating a candidate to run for governor.

Under the law passed earlier this year, gubernatorial candidates have to collect signatures from 5 to 10 percent of municipal deputies in a region, a difficult task for many opposition parties, except for the Communists, who have strong grassroots support.

The withdrawal of the three candidates from the Khimki race could benefit the main opposition candidate, Yevgenia Chirikova, known for her battle against the destruction of part of the local Khimki forest to create space for a government-built toll road.

Thirteen candidates, including Chirikova and Shakhov, remain in the race, along with former Moscow prefect Oleg Mitvol and eccentric heavy-metal musician Sergei Troitsky, also known as Spider, who has promised to turn Khimki into a Russian Las Vegas.

The Khimki vote is one of the few prominent races set for Sunday in which pro-Kremlin forces have not positioned themselves to ensure victory.

Strange Bedfellows

In two impoverished regions, local elites have formed unlikely alliances to increase the chances of pro-Kremlin candidates winning the top posts.

In the depressed Bryansk region, near the Belarussian border, unpopular Governor Nikolai Denin of United Russia was removed from the race Friday by a local court, which ruled that he had submitted invalid signatures when registering his candidacy.

The unprecedented court decision removing the ruling party governor from the race was

prompted by a complaint from Denin's main rival, Communist Party candidate Vladimir Potomsky.

Denin has appealed the decision with the Supreme Court, which is expected to rule on his fate this week. Even if he loses the appeal, United Russia appears positioned to turn the race its way.

Following the court decision barring Denin from running, two other candidates in the race announced that they would withdraw: Mikhail Marchenko of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and Andrei Ponomaryov of the liberal Yabloko party. Marchenko urged his supporters to back Denin.

LDPR frequently cooperates with United Russia on the national and regional levels, but Yabloko is rarely its ally.

Ponomaryov submitted a request to the regional elections commission on Monday to withdraw his candidacy.

If his request is granted, the Communist candidate, Potomsky, would become the only person in the race, and the vote would be postponed.

Ponomaryov said his decision to exit the race was dictated by polling that showed that he would lose decisively to Potomsky.

"I can't take part in a campaign to give victory to a Communist candidate," Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

Ponomaryov, a well-connected businessman and a member of the local public chamber set up by the regional administration, has also accused Potomsky of having connections to criminals, an allegation Potomsky denies.

But Ponomaryov said he would have stayed in the race if Denin had not been barred from running. "It would be good to check Yabloko's rating," Ponomaryov said, acknowledging that he would likely also lose the election if Denin participated.

The Yabloko politician said that he has a "good personal relationship" with Denin but that their rapport did not influence his decision.

Regional analyst Alexei Titkov said Ponomaryov's party affiliation was essentially irrelevant to his decision, saying he likely withdrew from the race in an attempt to improve his position on the regional level.

"A person representing the party branch on the local level often has his own interests that have only an oblique relationship to those of his party," Titkov said.

Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin said Monday that Ponomaryov would be stripped of his membership in the party for exiting the race.

One expert said the court decision removing Denin from the race had already done damage to United Russia by showing local elites that the party is no longer a dependable source

of protection.

"Why join if it doesn't bring with it the exclusive right of being untouchable?" regional analyst Alexander Kynev wrote in a column in Russian Forbes.

Carnegie Center analyst Nikolai Petrov said in comments published by the Center for Political Technologies think tank that authorities might use the situation to find a "much stronger" candidate if the election is put off.

Communist Collaborators

The United Russia gubernatorial candidate in Ryazan, another poor region, located about 150 kilometers southwest of Moscow, faces stiff competition.

Local experts predict there could be a runoff that would most likely pit ruling party candidate Oleg Kovalyov, a former State Duma deputy not from the region, against gray-haired Communist Party Duma Deputy Vladimir Fedotkin, who has lived in Ryazan since the 1970s.

Last month, a top challenger to Kovalyov, Igor Morozov of the Patriots of Russia party, withdrew from the race in an apparent backroom deal in which he was promised a seat in the Federation Council.

On Monday, Russian Pensioners Party candidate Svetlana Kosareva also said she wouldn't run and backed Kovalyov.

Fedotkin is a specialist on economic issues who opposes Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization.

The two other remaining candidates in the race are Alexander Sherin, a nationalist from LDPR, and Alexandra Perekhvatova from the Kremlin-backed Right Cause party.

Both Ryazan and Bryansk regions are seen as Communist strongholds, with the party coming in second to United Russia in the State Duma elections in December.

Analysts said that if the Communist candidates are elected, they will not turn into regional troublemakers as in the 1990s, when the party challenged the Kremlin for influence.

That view is shared by the candidates themselves.

"If the people elect me, I will find my place among the ranks and will become a part of the [power] vertical," Bryansk region candidate Potomsky told Gazeta.ru in an interview published Saturday.

Potomsky, who has scant ties to the Bryansk region, added that he doesn't agree with the liberal opposition forces who have organized anti-Kremlin protest marches in central Moscow and said he is going to concentrate on the region if elected.

Titkov said this balancing act of running against United Russia but taking pro-Kremlin stances was effective.

"He used a sound tactic. On the one hand, he wants to present himself as a disciplined party

man, and on the other he is sending certain signals that he has connections within the federal elite," Titkov, of the Institute of Regional Policy, said about Potomsky.

The three current governors in the other gubernatorial races — Sergei Mitin in the Novgorod region, Yevgeny Savchenko in the Belgorod region and Oleg Kozhemyako in the Amur region — are expected to win their elections easily.

But Titkov said the outcomes of the other races were not predictable.

He compared the upcoming elections with the situation during the early rule of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who forced regional Communist Party secretaries to compete in party elections.

"They [the secretaries] tried to put weak candidates in the races against them, but people who were tired of them voted for these alternatives without even thinking. Now there could be a similar outcome," Titkov said.

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