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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Proclaims Renewed Mandate With United Russia Wins

By Alexander Bratersky

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Voters marking their ballots Sunday in the Moscow region town of Khimki. **Igor Tabakov**

President Vladimir Putin said Monday that voters had shown their trust in the way the authorities are governing by choosing United Russia candidates in regional elections Sunday.

"For me, these election results were not surprising. I consider this one more step confirming voters' intent to support the current institutions of power and the development of Russian statehood," Putin said at a meeting with Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov.

The results served as a wake-up call to the opposition, which played down United Russia's wins by pointing to low turnout and alleged violations but also acknowledged their poor performance.

Prominent anti-Kremlin figures put forward various ideas on how to react, with some

declaring the need for renewed street protests while others emphasized the need to hone campaign strategies to improve outcomes in future votes.

The results of almost 5,000 regional elections held Sunday were largely one-sided in favor of United Russia, particularly in the showcase gubernatorial votes, the first to be held since 2005, after they were abolished by Putin.

Ruling party candidates won all five governor races, with margins of victory ranging from around 40 percent to more than 60 percent.

The most prominent opposition candidate running in an election Sunday, environmental activist Yevgenia Chirikova, placed second in the mayoral vote in the Moscow region town of Khimki, losing to acting Mayor Oleg Shakhov, who was backed by United Russia. Chirikova gained about 17 percent of the vote to Shakhov's 47 percent. Former federal environmental inspector Oleg Mitvol placed third with just over 14 percent.

In elections for regional legislatures, the ruling party gained more than 50 percent of the vote in five of the six regions where voting was held — in the far eastern Sakhalin region, the Krasnodar region, the Penza region, the Saratov region and the Udmurtia republic — and garnered 45 percent of the vote in North Ossetia-Alania, about 20 percent more than the second-place party, Patriots of Russia.

Some opposition politicians said the results were due in part to what they described as low turnout.

In the gubernatorial races, turnout ranged from about 37 percent in the Amur region to almost 60 percent in the Belgorod region, a range that elections chief Churov praised at his meeting with Putin, describing it as "up to 50 percent and above." Turnout was about 27 percent in Sakhalin and from 41 to 50 percent in the other five regions voting for regional legislatures.

Maverick opposition leader Vladimir Milov said those turnout levels undermined United Russia's triumph.

"The level of support for the party of power is still low, so it can achieve victory only with low turnout," he said.

Other anti-government leaders complained of unfair campaigning conditions and violations during voting, allegations that independent vote monitor Golos echoed.

"We have not moved [forward] one iota from the critical situation with the virtual absence of real competition and the absence of real elections in Russia," Golos director Lilia Shibanova said at a news conference Monday, Interfax reported.

"Unfortunately, the situation is worsening in regards to both the legal norms and the attitude of the elections commission to observers' civil activism," she said.

Golos found the most problems in the Saratov, Ryazan, Krasnodar and Altai regions, according to the news agency.

Hundreds of reports of ballot-stuffing, "carousels" or repeated voting at multiple polling places by groups of voters, and other violations were reported to Golos during Sunday's elections. The Central Elections Commission said Monday that the few dozen violations reported to it could not have an impact on the results.

Opposition leader and former State Duma Deputy Gennady Gudkov called Sunday's votes "pseudo-elections," saying the way they were run would push people to protest.

"United Russia and the current regime are destroying the mechanisms for a civilized transfer of power and are forcing people into the streets," Gudkov, the senior Just Russia party politician, said in a statement Monday.

Suren Gazaryan, an environmental activist from the Krasnodar region, shared a similar opinion on Twitter.

"I finally lost all illusions of having honest elections with today's authorities," Gazaryan said.

Gazaryan, who was running on the party list of the liberal Yabloko party, didn't get elected to the regional legislature. He said the vote was manipulated in favor of United Russia candidates.

But Gazaryan's views on the opposition's participation in elections were challenged by Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin, who said the party election strategy was to win "island by island."

"You have to have patience," Mitrokhin told The Moscow Times on Monday.

Mitrokhin also said that smaller territories allowed for tighter control over election procedures by observers, and he pointed to party victories in two small cities, Pervouralsk in the Sverdlovsk region and Elektrogorsk in the Moscow region.

Other opposition parties gained isolated wins in local elections but lost by large margins to United Russia in the regional legislative votes.

Support for the Communist Party hovered between 8 and 18 percent in the regional legislative elections. The nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and A Just Russia failed to exceed the minimum threshold to gain seats in North Ossetia, Penza, Krasnodar and Saratov.

The Patriots of Russia party, founded in 2005 after splitting off from the Communist Party, turned in a rare impressive performance in North Ossetia, drawing 26 percent of the vote for regional legislators. The party's Ossetian branch is headed by former United Russia member Arsen Fadzayev, a wrestling champion who is popular in the republic.

But Patriots of Russia can hardly be called an opposition party, as it is a member of the All-Russia People's Front, a loose union of public groups and political structures that backs Putin.

The liberal-leaning RPR-Parnas party won legislative seats in the city of Barnaul, in the Altai region, where party co-leader Vladimir Ryzhkov, who is from the city, has strong ties.

Analysts and political leaders in part blamed a lack of fresh faces among the opposition

for United Russia's dominance in the elections.

"People who didn't vote are tired of both the authorities and the opposition. They are looking for new faces and new ideas and don't see them," said political expert Pavel Salin, who called Sunday's results a "serious failure" by the opposition.

Salin cited the example of the main opposition candidate in the Bryansk region gubernatorial race, Communist Party hopeful Vladimir Potomsky, a businessman from the Leningrad region with no ties to Bryansk. "The main thing that worked against him was the fact that he was an outsider," Salin said.

He also said the authorities have made it difficult for new players to emerge, noting the nearly nonexistent vote totals for newly registered parties such as the obscure Cities of Russia and Green Alliance, led by Mitvol.

"Those parties are spoilers, since the authorities have especially prolonged the registration of real opposition parties," Salin said.

Senior United Russia party leader Andrei Isayev also criticized the opposition for lacking strong challengers, naming Yevgenia Chirikova as the only recognizable anti-Kremlin candidate to run.

"The main force bringing [voters] to elections is the opposition," Isayev said in comments carried on the United Russia website. "It rounds up its supporters to change the situation, and if it is active, the authorities' supporters also come out to confirm their choice."

"The turnout was low in places where the opposition was not able to put forward impressive candidates or interesting programs," he said.

Veteran opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said on his LiveJournal blog Monday that the opposition has to be more careful when choosing its candidates.

"Participation for the sake of participation is useless," he said.

Gubernatorial Election Winners

Region	Name	Vote Total
Ryazan region	Oleg Kovalyov	64.43%
Amur region	Oleg Kozhemyako	77.28%
Belgorod region	Yevgeny Savchenko	77.64%
Bryansk region	Nikolai Denin	65.22%
Novgorod region	Sergei Mitin	75.95%

All listed winners are from United Russia.

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