The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

United Russia Primed for Primaries

By Nikolai Petrov

May 20, 2013




Nikolai Petrov

United Russia started primaries last week in most of the regions that will hold elections on Sept. 8.

Primaries have been initiated and are now overseen by presidential deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin. Their purpose is to improve the quality of party candidates and to prevent conflicts among the elite when forming party lists. The Kremlin's goal is not to control the process since primaries are largely the domain of local party authorities. If governors can produce the desired results, Moscow does not interfere. What's more, United Russia primaries

are consultative in nature and do not have a direct effect. Widespread manipulation of the primaries sparked a number of scandals. In 2011, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had to personally step in to resolve one of those scandals prior to State Duma elections in the Primorye region. The result was that election results from two polling stations were nullified.

The All-Russia People's Front, an umbrella structure intended to reduce the impact of United Russia's declining popularity, has taken part in the United Russia primaries ever since its inception and had an even greater presence this year than ever before. The primaries are held in four different formats proposed by the federal party leadership. The first format employs special party electors and is mainly used for gubernatorial primaries in both direct elections and regions such as Dagestan and Ingushetia, where the parliaments have chosen to appoint their governors. The second format was employed last year and allows for the participation of electors from partner organizations.

The third and most liberal of the new formats for primaries was given a trial run last fall in the elections for the legislative assembly of Sakhalin, garnering 50 percent of the vote for the party of power for the first time in many years. This type of primary is similar to ordinary elections in that it reflects the will of voters and is accompanied by an election campaign and media coverage of each stage of the electoral process. Any citizen who can enlist the support of 10 United Russia members has the right to run as a candidate.

These elections are noteworthy for the decline in the number of United Russia candidates, a trend already evident in the primaries. Some political analysts are already claiming that the All-Russia People's Front is gradually becoming the new ruling party. In the gubernatorial elections in Chukotka, all of the candidates, including the incumbent, are with the people's front. The same looks to be true in the mayoral race in Voronezh, where the incumbent is also with the front. As for the two most troublesome regions for United Russia — Smolensk, where the legislative assembly will be elected, and Ryazan, where the City Duma will be formed — United Russia is strengthening the local party lists with high-profile State Duma deputies and members of the Federation Council.

Despite the authorities' slapdash attempt to manipulate the results by shifting the vote to late summer, the Sept. 8 elections do not bode well for United Russia. At best, the party might be able to minimize its losses. The results of the campaign will be analyzed at the United Russia congress in November, but significant changes in party politics should become evident much sooner, when the All-Russia People's Front congress is held in June immediately following the conclusion of the United Russia primaries.

Nikolai Petrov is a professor of political science at the Higher School of Economics.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/20/united-russia-primed-for-primaries-a24167