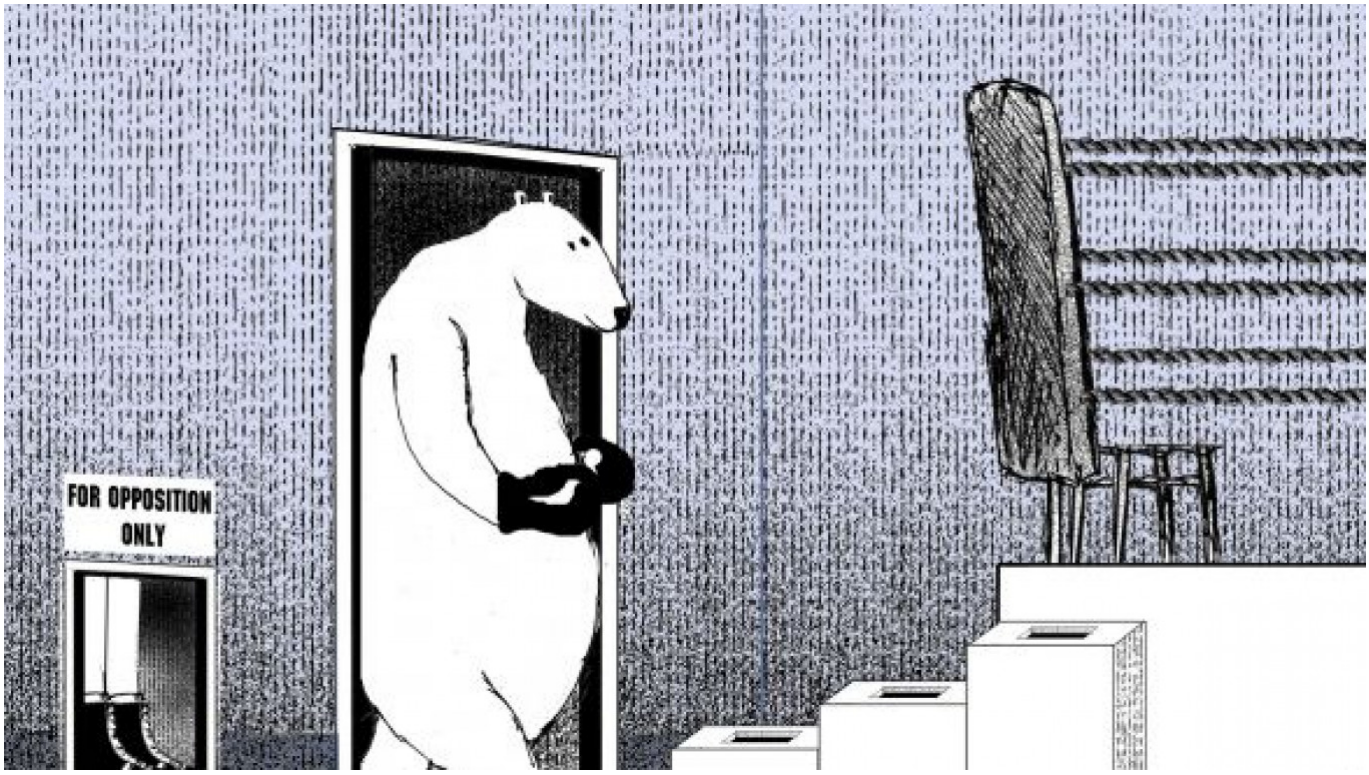
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kremlin Manipulation of Elections Continues

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

July 15, 2013



The ostensible return of "direct" gubernatorial elections and the Kremlin's desire to avoid any surprise results means that the elections of governors has become the authorities' latest playing field for the manipulation of the vote. Last year, all five incumbent governors who were up for elections were easily re-elected to their posts, thereby reinforcing President Vladimir Putin's power vertical. This year, eight regions will elect their governors and exactly the same pro-Kremlin results are expected.

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candidate is popular, the authorities permit as many opposition candidates as possible to dilute the vote. If the Kremlin candidate is weak, the authorities exclude all serious rivals.

The Kremlin uses two tactics to eliminate competition and guarantee victory for its preferred candidates. First, wherever the pro-Kremlin candidate is popular, the authorities permit as many opposition candidates as possible to dilute the vote of disgruntled voters and to make their candidate's victory look all the more impressive. Second, wherever the Kremlin's candidate is weak and faces a strong opposition candidate, the authorities use their old trick of completely excluding all serious contenders from the elections.

The first tactic will be employed in the elections in Moscow and Moscow region, where the United Russia candidates — Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and Andrei Vorobyov, respectively — are in strong positions. Twelve or 13 candidates will be allowed to compete for the Moscow region gubernatorial spot, thereby making it easier for Vorobyov to cinch his victory in the first round of voting. As for Sobyanin, he will face five contenders in the Moscow mayoral race.

According to the latest Levada Center poll, 78 percent of those who have already chosen a candidate support Sobyanin in the mayoral election, up from 67 percent in June. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which he would lose that support in the remaining two months before elections. Support for opposition candidate Alexei Navalny has also grown — from 3 percent to 8 percent — but no threat at all to Sobyanin. And that is why the authorities helped Navalny obtain the signatures needed to qualify for the election. In fact, half of the politicians endorsing his candidacy come from United Russia and its supporters. In this way, the authorities can claim that the mayoral election in Moscow is free and competitive without placing their hold on power at risk. What's more, a win for Sobyanin in such elections would allow him to say he is the legitimate mayor for all Muscovites, including the liberal, creative class that forms the basis for the protest movement.

Vorobyov, who has close ties to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, has a similarly large lead over his rivals in the Moscow region race. According to a VTsIOM survey, 47 percent of the population and 80 percent of those who have already chosen a candidate support Vorobyov. Not more than 3 percent of decided voters support Konstantin Cheremisov of the Communist Party or Gennady Gudkov of Yabloko. For that reason, regional administration officials themselves organized the gathering of signatures from municipal deputies to enable rival

candidates to run. The authorities hope that having multiple candidates on the ballot will give Vorobyov's future electoral win a high degree of legitimacy.

Both Navalny and Gudkov are also members of the Coordinating Council of the opposition. The authorities are seeking to inflict a painful electoral defeat on them in Moscow and the Moscow region, the most opposition-minded and largest region in the country with 19 million people in total, or 26 percent of Russia's population. They hope this will deliver another blow to the protest movement.

As for other races where the ruling party is in a weaker position, the authorities use their second and time-proven tactic of simply excluding strong, popular rivals with the aid of crude administration methods.

In the Moscow mayoral race, the Kremlin persuaded billionaire and Civil Platform party head Mikhail Prokhorov, who has a 20 percent popularity rating in Moscow, not to run in the election. Prokhorov claimed that his foreign assets were the reason for pulling out of the race, but few believed this pretext. Strong Civil Platform candidates in Yaroslavl and Chita will probably also be excluded from participating in elections. Meanwhile, Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov has been arrested on corruption charges and has little chance of running in this year's elections in September. In addition, former Zabaikalsky region Deputy Governor Alexei Koshelev was prohibited from running after 45 municipal deputies' signatures were disqualified in an underhanded manipulation of the "municipal filter" rule.

The same scenario is playing out in the elections in Khakasia where the RP-Party of People's Freedom has put forward the popular candidate Oleg Ivanov. He will run against Viktor Zimin, the unpopular candidate appointed by Moscow who is linked to a number of scandals. Zimin's administration has made great efforts to block municipal deputies from giving their signatures to Ivanov, even frightening notary publics into refusing to notarize the signatures once they are obtained.

Gudkov speaks of an "animal fear" among municipal deputies, regional and municipal heads, businesspeople, rank and file state employees, notary publics and even community center directors who refuse to rent a hall to opposition candidates. Such people might be easy enough to control, but they do not make a sound foundation for building a modern and progressive state.

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