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Experts Say Upcoming Elections More Competitive

By Natalya Krainova

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The upcoming Sept. 8 regional elections across Russia will be more competitive than the previous ones, amid declining public support for the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, experts say.

Despite compounded bureaucratic obstacles for the registration of candidates, ongoing regional election campaigns show an increased outflow of candidates from the four parliamentary parties, public doubts about the legitimacy of the elections and sluggish activities of candidates, a survey released this week said.

The 26-page analysis was prepared by the Civic Initiatives Committee, a nongovernmental group headed by former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, and posted on its website Wednesday.

The survey was carried out by three experts, including two from Golos, Russia's only

independent nationwide elections watchdog, which decided to close permanently in late June after the Justice Ministry suspended its activities for six months over its failure to register as a "foreign agent."

Separately, a pundit told The Moscow Times that the upcoming elections will be especially competitive, particularly because the population is disillusioned with United Russia.

"I assume that the presidential administration eventually succeeded in persuading regional authorities that elections must be competitive, if not transparent and legitimate," said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information.

On Sept. 8, eight regions including the Moscow region will elect governors, 16 regions will vote for their parliaments. Eight cities, including Moscow, will elect mayors, and five cities will elect their legislatures.

One trend in the current election campaigning is the exodus of candidates from the four parties presented in the State Duma due to a growing disillusionment with authorities amid a rise in the number of parties.

Since they hold seats in the Duma, A Just Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Communist Party are largely viewed as so-called "puppet opposition" linked to the authorities.

Members of United Russia generally leave to run as representatives of the People's Front — For Russia, formerly the All-Russia People's Front, a movement founded by President Vladimir Putin, and some candidates leave United Russia to run as independents.

But the total number of independents may show only a minor increase compared to the previous regional elections in October, because opposition candidates fear that the signatures they collect to support their bids to run independently will be rejected by authorities. Party candidates, on the other hand, are not required to collect people's signatures.

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party is increasingly becoming the party of the "second choice" for regional elites, after United Russia, experts said.

"There is no doubt that the representation of new parties will grow in state agencies, which may serve as a trigger for many elite players who are displeased with their role and status in systemic parties but are afraid to part with them," experts said.

Another characteristic of the current campaign period is the increased number of bureaucratic hurdles for candidates.

Among them are "the drastic and unjustified complication" of documents needed for registering as a candidate and "the excessive increase" in the number of signatures of municipal deputies that gubernatorial candidates must collect, the survey said.

The other two bureaucratic obstacles include the ban on convicts running and the scheduling of the vote for early September, which requires campaigning in the summer, when many people are away on vacation. This time around, many candidates campaigned in the spring, now resulting in a sluggish pace of the campaigns.

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