

Communist Party Deputy Elected Mayor of Novosibirsk

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A Communist party candidate has won the mayoral election in Russia's third-largest city, Novosibirsk, in a setback for the party at the center of President Vladimir Putin's tightly controlled political system.

With all the ballots counted, Anatoly Lokot topped a field of 11 candidates with 43.7 percent of the vote, defeating ruling United Russia party candidate Vladimir Znatkov, who polled 39.6 percent, the local electoral commission said Monday, Interfax reported. Voter turnout was fairly low at 31.3 percent.

State Duma deputy Ilya Ponomaryov and five other opposition candidates had earlier withdrawn from Sunday's election, leaving the coast clear for Lokot to challenge the United Russia party candidate unhindered. Opposition parties had agreed to focus on increasing turnout and unite around the strongest candidate ahead of the balloting.

Defeat in the Siberian city is a blow to United Russia, which critics accuse of using the levers of executive power to maintain its grip on administrations and legislatures across Russia in the absence of active popular support.

Although United Russia is a key source of support for Putin, in power since 2000, he has tried to decrease his reliance on it by courting rivals and creating a less formal organization called the People's Front.

Putin has also blunted what force the Communists have to oppose him by himself appealing to nostalgia for the Soviet era and defiance of the West, to the point where the Kremlin's liberal opponents say the Communists are now little more than a cog in Putin's system.

The Communists — the second-largest party in the national parliament, the Duma — have supported Kremlin foreign policy initiatives such as the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region last month.

A by-election was held in Novosibirsk, a city of about 1.4 million, after the longtime mayor stepped down in January to join the regional government. Znatkov has been serving as acting mayor, while Lokot is a member of the Duma.

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