

Russian Regions Prepare to Vote After Campaign of Tricks, Complacency

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All the candidates seeking election were appointed as acting governors by Putin in recent months, and most were nominated and endorsed by the ruling United Russia party.

On Sunday, the governors of 21 Russian regions and more than 1,300 heads of small city administrations will be elected, together with deputies for 11 regional parliaments and 25 city legislatures.

The nationwide elections, known as unified election day, are considered by some analysts to be a final rehearsal for the State Duma elections in 2016 in which tactics and methods are being tested accordingly.

The main question is whether the opposition will be able to gain any ground, but chances are slim, say pundits.

“The Kremlin fears elections at all levels,” Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst,

told The Moscow Times, commenting on vigorous efforts in some regions to eliminate the opposition at the candidate registration stage.

The campaign has seen several tactics employed that have raised eyebrows among political commentators.

Securing the Seat

This year nine regional governors resigned before their terms officially ended in order to participate in the elections in September. Most of them still had another two years left in office, though some had just a few days left of their terms.

Mikhail Ignatyev, head of the republic of Chuvashia, handed in his notice in June, two months before his office was due to expire, according to the independent election watchdog Golos. Rustam Minnikhanov, head of the republic of Tatarstan, proved the most impatient: He resigned just a day before his term ended on March 24 this year.

Under Russian legislation, if a sitting governor resigns before their term expires, elections are scheduled for the closest unified election day. Critics say this tactic is used by pro-Kremlin governors to secure their seat for another five years.

The technique was piloted by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, who resigned unexpectedly in June 2013 and was re-elected in September after winning a tough battle against Russian opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny, who almost forced Sobyanin into a second round of voting.

Among the benefits of the sudden summer resignation, analysts named the fact that it caught the opposition off guard, while Sobyanin was able to plan the campaign for as long as he thought necessary, since he knew he would resign.

The official reason most of the governors give President Vladimir Putin, who has to accept their resignation for the race to go forward, is their desire to become elected governors — most were instead appointed before gubernatorial elections were reinstated in 2012 — and be held accountable by their electorate.

Stymieing the Opposition

This year, Navalny and his allies are actively participating in the race as part of the Democratic Coalition, which consists of Navalny's Party of Progress, Parnas and several other parties.

The coalition put forward candidates for the regional parliaments of Novosibirsk, Kostroma, Magadan and Kaluga, but only succeeded in registering them in Kostroma.

To eliminate the opposition, election commissions used the so-called signature filter that proved effective in 2014. In order to register, campaigners are required to gather a certain number of signatures from potential voters in their support and submit them to the election commissions. These commissions frequently declare some of the signatures invalid on various grounds, and deny the candidates registration.

This tactic has proved to be easier and less risky than falsifying the results of the actual votes, said Andrei Buzin, co-chair of the council of Golos. After widespread fraud accusations following the State Duma elections in 2011, the authorities made the decision to minimize ballot fraud during major elections, he said, as it generates a major media backlash. Now they prefer to use another technique to get rid of the opposition: cutting it off at the registration stage.

In addition to failing to enter the race, some of Navalny's allies suffered collateral damage. His longtime supporter Leonid Volkov, who ran a campaign in Novosibirsk, is currently under investigation and faces up to six years in prison for allegedly breaking a microphone belonging to a LifeNews tabloid reporter.

Andrei Pivovarov, the opposition campaign manager in Kostroma, is on trial for an alleged attempt to steal personal data. Georgy Alburov, an investigator at Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and a candidate in Magadan, was attacked by unidentified thugs while campaigning.

After his allies were pushed out of most of the regions they had stood in, Navalny announced a rally in Moscow on Sept. 20 and called on his supporters to come and express their protest against the elections he says are unfair.

Foreign Funding

A number of United Russia candidates running in gubernatorial elections were spotted receiving foreign funding for their campaigns in direct violation of election laws by the independent election watchdog Golos.

The largest donations from abroad were received by candidates from the ruling United Russia party and by the party itself, Golos revealed in research published last month on its website.

The usual scheme for concealing foreign sources of donations involves two Russian intermediaries, the report said. The Russian company that officially donates money to the candidate must be owned or controlled by another Russian company, which in turn is owned or managed by a foreign entity.

In many cases, the funding came from offshore companies registered in Cyprus or the Virgin Islands that are stockholders of Russian enterprises.

This year at least two United Russia candidates — Viktor Nazarov in the Omsk region and Vasily Golubev in the Rostov region, both incumbent governors — received foreign funding through intermediary Russian companies, the report said.

Spokespeople for Nazarov's campaign claimed the money was returned to the donor as soon as it became clear that it had come from abroad, the Kommersant newspaper reported last month.

No Manifestos

Only five acting governors — of the Arkhangelsk, Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Sakhalin and Jewish autonomous regions — have published original electoral manifestos, the Petersburg

Politics think tank said in a report published last week.

The manifestos that have been published mostly focus on previous achievements and promise stability instead of development, the think tank found.

“Some of the manifestos are written in such a way as though the candidates have already won the elections,” the report said.

All the candidates seeking election were appointed as acting governors by Putin in recent months, and most were nominated and endorsed by the ruling United Russia party.

The lack of manifestos was explained by pundits as down to a deficit of clear vision among candidates and complacency that since they have already been endorsed by Putin, there is no need to persuade voters that they will improve their lives.

“Governors don’t need manifestos because manifestos will not get them elected, only the Kremlin’s endorsement will do that,” said Natalya Zubarevich, director of the regions program at the Independent Institute of Social Policy, a think tank in Moscow.

Senator Castling

Gubernatorial elections this year could result in a few changes in the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament. Last month Vladimir Yakunin, the notorious head of the Russian Railways state monopoly and a close friend of Putin, raised eyebrows by announcing his decision to leave the lucrative job for a senator’s seat.

Yakunin was put forward as a candidate for the Federation Council by Nikolai Tsukanov, the acting governor of the Kaliningrad region, who is taking part in Sunday’s elections and who, if he wins, will be able to delegate a senator to the upper chamber of parliament.

But Yakunin, accused by his detractors of making Russian Railways highly unprofitable, seems confident of his backer’s success: He has already left the state rail monopoly and has been replaced by one of its top managers, Oleg Belozarov.

The seat of senator for the Arkhangelsk region could be taken by Viktor Pavlenko, the current mayor of Arkhangelsk, known for suggesting a local gay parade could be held on Paratroopers Day, which is notorious for its drunken violence.

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