

When Kremlin Candidate Loses Election, Even Voters Are Surprised

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Sergei Levchenko

When Communist Sergei Levchenko beat the incumbent from Russian President Vladimir Putin's party to become governor of Irkutsk region in Siberia on Sunday, even the voters who backed him were surprised: the Kremlin doesn't lose elections.

Levchenko resoundingly defeated incumbent Sergei Yeroshchenko to become the first politician to oust a candidate supported by Putin's United Russia party since the Kremlin allowed voters to choose regional governors in 2012.

"I'm shocked. My husband and I voted for Levchenko but couldn't imagine he would win," Vlada, an Irkutsk resident who declined to give her surname, said, as she pushed a stroller with her baby through a park.

"We don't support the Communists or Lenin," she said. "It's just that Yeroshchenko was so confident of his victory that we wanted him to understand that there were people against him."

In Russia's highly controlled political system, it is hard to say exactly what the result means.

The Communists, though Russia's largest nominal opposition party, strongly support Kremlin policy on many contentious issues like last year's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula. The Kremlin has been known to give quiet backing to Communist politicians elsewhere in the past.

Nevertheless, by most local accounts, Levchenko achieved his victory campaigning for genuine change, while the United Russia political machine supported the incumbent. Voters said they were fed up with the high cost of living and wanted to send a message to Moscow.

"United Russia used to win every time, people were fed up and wanted changes," Pavel Kupreyev, a 27-year-old Irkutsk resident, told Reuters.

Soak Up Social Discontent

Lev Gudkov, director of pollster the Levada Center, said the election in Irkutsk would not be a real challenge to the Kremlin's authority because the Communists, like other opposition parties in parliament, are tame.

"The systemic opposition is not an opposition, but different factions of the ruling party," he said. "They work to soak up social discontent."

"The situation hasn't changed. Discontent of people living in the regions has broken through. This was just down to the Kremlin's failure to manage elections."

Nevertheless, the apparent inability of United Russia to get its way suggests that the Kremlin political machine may be less monolithic than thought, which could have implications for parliamentary elections next year.

An economic crisis brought on by low international oil prices and U.S. and EU sanctions imposed over Russia's involvement in Ukraine means life is getting harder for most Russians for the first time since Putin took power in 1999.

Putin scrapped all direct elections for regional governors in 2005, but reinstated them for most regions in 2012 in a concession to public discontent that had spilled over in violent mass protests in Moscow.

Yeroshchenko was one of a number of United Russia governors who voluntarily resigned in May, triggering an election. Critics called it a cynical tactic to secure re-election before the economic crisis got worse. If so, it backfired.

"[My victory] is an example of how, if we unify various political forces, we can put up a fight, and defeat the ruling party," Levchenko told reporters on Sunday night.

In the background, a bust of Soviet leader Josef Stalin's head looked on as young activists manned a call-center and tried to check whether the count had been accurate or not.

The Kremlin said the rare defeat proved that Russian elections were legitimate and transparent.

"I think those parties who had expected pressure from the authorities have changed their mind now," Sergei Neverov, one of United Russia's leaders, said on the party's website.

The incumbent, Yeroshchenko, fell just short of outright victory in the first round with 49.6 percent of the vote, forcing a runoff with Levchenko who had placed second. Two days later, Levchenko and Gennady Zyuganov, the veteran Communist party leader, were invited to the Kremlin for a meeting.

"It was just to take a look at him, to see who Levchenko is," one Communist lawmaker told Reuters. Levchenko confirmed the meeting took place but would not say what was discussed.

When the second round took place on Sunday, Communist activists said they still thought they would not be permitted to win. Even as counting was under way they felt the Kremlin was about to turn them over: initial results announced with just 3.8 percent of the vote counted put Yeroshchenko ahead.

The Communists protested in the hall. When the final tally was announced, Levchenko had won in a landslide by 14 percentage points.

"We were prepared to go to war," said Yekaterina Anisimova, a Communist activist, who believes the authorities concluded there were too many votes for Levchenko to falsify the result.

"It was very hard for them. They had to falsify by 300 percent. This was arithmetically impossible. The turnout was too high, the protest vote was too high."

The election commission denied any falsification had taken place and said the early results differed from the final result because it reflected only a small number of polling stations.

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