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Support for Russia's Ruling Party Slips in Regional Elections Amid Pension Protests

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Igor Ivanko / Moskva News Agency

Russia's ruling United Russia Party suffered a rare setback in regional elections on Sunday despite winning most of the seats, a reversal its leaders and election chiefs blamed on unpopular plans to raise the pension age.

The results in weekend voting for heads of about one third of Russia's regions were the worst for United Russia, which backs President Vladimir Putin, since elections for regional leaders were re-introduced in 2012. Elections took place in 80 Russian regions on Sept. 9, with gubernatorial, legislative assembly and State Duma seats up for grabs. The vote took place amid nationwide pension protests organized by opposition politician Alexei Navalny in which over 800 people were reportedly arrested.

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While candidates from the ruling United Russia party performed strongly overall, four United Russia candidates running for governor were forced into run-off votes after failing to win majorities.

Two were beaten into second place — by a communist candidate in Khakassia region and a nationalist LDPR candidate in Khabarovsk region — and two finished first but failed to win the more than 50 percent of votes needed for outright victory — in the Primorye and Vladimir regions.

United Russia also lost ground to the Communist Party and LDPR in some areas in weekend elections to regional parliaments.

Commenting for Vedomosti, political analyst Vitaliy Ivanov called the relatively poor showings of United Russia candidates in regional elections a consequence of the controversial pension reform that is currently making headlines in Russia.

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Ella Pamfilova, the head of the Central Election Commission, said it was obvious the planned pension changes had prompted voters to register their discontent at the ballot box, something she said was a sign of genuine political competition.

"It's a good lesson for everyone," she told a news conference. "It's very useful for the party of power to get a bit of a jolt."

Speaking in the far eastern city of Vladivostok, Putin told government officials he was unfazed by the fact that re-runs would be needed in four regions.

"It's an absolutely normal phenomenon," he said.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, the leader of United Russia and a Putin ally, told party activists on Sunday night he deemed the results "worthy" given the election campaign had taken place in what he called difficult conditions.

"... There's a heated public discussion in society right now about a whole raft of changes, including changes to pension law. That undoubtedly ratcheted up the intensity of the campaign and of the political battle," Medvedev said.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyanin cruised to a comfortable re-

election with 69.54 percent of the vote, while Vadim Kumin from the Communist Party came second with 11.65 percent. But despite a huge get-out-the-vote campaign, turnout was just 30 percent as many Muscovites stayed away. That was less than the turnout at the previous mayoral election in 2013.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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