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Russian Cleaner Takes Office After Surprise Election Win

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Marina Udgodskaya's landslide win against her village's pro-Kremlin incumbent has made national headlines. **Marina Udgodskaya / VK**

A cleaner from a small Russian village has put away her brooms and become its reluctant leader after unexpectedly winning last month's regional vote and overthrowing the pro-Kremlin incumbent.

"I didn't put myself forward," Marina Udgodskaya, 35, told the Podyom news website in one of her early interviews before going silent due to overwhelming national media attention.

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Udgodskaya explained that she was persuaded to run by the incumbent to meet the vote's two-candidate minimum requirement. Neither candidate campaigned in any way, but the former cleaner swept to power in a 87-to-48 landslide.

“I didn’t do anything at all, but the people came and voted,” she said.

On Thursday, Udgodskaya was inaugurated as head of Povalikhino, the largest of 29 villages in the Kostroma region 300 kilometers northeast of Moscow. Their combined population totals around 400 people.

Her triumph over pro-Kremlin incumbent Nikolai Loktev is seen less as a political statement from the villagers toward Moscow and more as a personal rebuke of the 58-year-old former policeman’s leadership style.

“I respect Nikolai Sergeyevich very much,” Udgodskaya told reporters after the swearing-in ceremony Thursday.

Other locales, notably Russia’s third-largest city of Novosibirsk and the Siberian city of Tomsk, saw opposition candidates win seats on Sept. 13 despite nationwide irregularities and claims of fraud. These candidates received the active backing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny’s “Smart Vote” strategy, which urges voters to cast their ballots for the candidate with the highest chance of unseating pro-Kremlin rivals.

Udgodskaya had considered quitting, but that turned out to be a costly option: the small pensioners’ party that nominated her says Udgodskaya would have been saddled with the steep costs of a re-run.

“I think she’ll cope. The whole village will help,” village shopkeeper Irina told the BBC.

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