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5 Things That Shaped Russia's Regions in 2023

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As the world's attention remains fixated on the war in Ukraine and the constant intrigue of Kremlin politics, it is easy to overlook what has been happening in Russia's regions. Yet the past year proved to be no less eventful for the regions beyond Moscow than it was for the country as a whole.

Here is our roundup of some of the key developments that defined Russia's regions in 2023:

Getting out the vote

In September, Russia held elections for thousands of seats in regional councils and legislatures, as well as for the governorship of over 20 regions. Unsurprisingly, members of the ruling United Russia party retained their posts with comfortable majorities of over 70% in nearly all regions, aside from the Oryol region and republic of Khakasia, where the Communists — the usual party of second place — were victorious.

Reports of widespread voting irregularities marred the elections, as independent observers received hundreds of complaints about alleged voting violations. Authorities turned to a mixed toolkit for manipulating the election results, such as electronic voting systems designed to increase turnout, as well as more crude methods of ballot stuffing and coercive voting at people's workplaces.

What made this year's regional elections noteworthy was not the results themselves but the lessons the Kremlin appears to have learned as it readies for the 2024 presidential election — which will see President Vladimir Putin run for a fifth term in office.

Authorities realized they could not rely on patriotic ideology alone to secure votes, and pro-war messaging requires careful calculation amid growing apathy among Russians toward the conflict in Ukraine as well as rising prices at the store. Instead, focusing on the economy, regional development and the government's achievements is more likely to hit home with voters.

The war comes home

More than 100 civilians have been killed on Russian territory and in annexed Crimea since the start of Moscow's invasion, according to estimates by the independent 7x7 news website, with most of the confirmed deaths having happened over the past year.

Frequent cross-border drone attacks and shelling have impacted towns in western Russia's Belgorod region more than anywhere else. By the end of 2023, at least 67 civilians were killed in the region, which borders eastern Ukraine.

Russian far-right volunteer units fighting on the side of Ukraine launched a surprise incursion into the Belgorod region's Grayvoron district in May, triggering an evacuation of residents from the area. At least 13 people were injured during the attacks and one person died, according to Belgorod governor Vyacheslav Gladkov. In June, intensifying attacks led to a mass evacuation from the nearby Shebekino district.

While Kyiv never admits responsibility for the strikes on Russian territory, for those living in Russia's border regions, the invasion of Ukraine has long ceased to be a distant conflict that can easily be ignored, becoming a disruptive force that is upending entire communities.

"Creeping" mobilization

Despite the Kremlin's repeated assurances that it has no plans for further military mobilization, authorities across Russia have continued to quietly recruit more men into the armed forces. Activists say these new recruits — often officially referred to as "volunteers" — are increasingly pressured into military service, with authorities targeting marginalized groups, such as migrants, recently naturalized citizens, the unemployed and debtors.

According to the independent war monitor Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), Russia's regions are bearing the brunt of the "creeping" mobilization drive, as officials outside Moscow are believed to have received much higher recruitment quotas than their counterparts in the Russian capital and other major urban centers.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin was reportedly hoping to recruit as many as 470,000 "volunteers" in 2023, but according to CIT, authorities likely fell significantly short of this ambitious target.

Tatarstan loses its president

Situated in central Russia, the republic of Tatarstan has long been viewed as a stronghold of regional autonomy. In 1992, the region voted to secede from Russia — but it later chose to remain a part of the country after agreeing to a power-sharing treaty with Moscow.

In January, however, the head of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov ratified a series of amendments to the region's constitution that effectively removed the last vestigates of local self-governance. These changes notably excluded the term "sovereignty" from the constitution, dissolved the region's supreme court and curtailed the authority of the regional parliament.

One of the most contentious amendments was the abolishment of Tatarstan's presidency. While 12 Russian regions were bestowed with local presidencies in the 1990s, these offices were gradually dissolved under pressure from the Kremlin. The move this year to get rid of Tatarstan's presidency was initially rejected by regional lawmakers, a rare show of defiance toward the federal government. But authorities in Tatarstan eventually yielded to pressure from Moscow, settling for the substitution of the "president" title with "rais," an Arabic-derived term meaning "leader."

Eggflation

All across Russia, the price of chicken eggs has gone up by more than 45% since the start of the year, caused by a range of issues, from higher costs of labor and transportation to the rising price of chicken feed and antibiotics, which were imported from Europe before the war. Regional authorities across the country have been forced to organize emergency shipments of eggs from nearby countries — including from Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan — to keep store shelves stocked and prices under control.

The cost of eggs — a key ingredient in many popular New Year's dishes like Olivier salad — has become such a hot-button issue among Russians that Putin was forced to apologize for what he described as a "setback in the government's work" during his end-of-year press conference in early December.

"I'm sorry about this problem," he said, vowing to bring the price of eggs down.

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