

By Pressing Onward With Elections in Battlefield Kursk Region, Kremlin Seeks to Show Everything Is Business as Usual

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Aleksei Konovalov/TASS

The Kremlin refuses to cancel next month's elections in the Kursk border region despite Ukraine's ongoing offensive there, deeming it to be "only a local crisis" from a military perspective, three Russian officials familiar with the election preparations told Politika.Kozlov.

The officials agreed to speak on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue.

Ukraine's Aug. 6 incursion into the Kursk region surprised not only the Russian military and special services but also the Kremlin's political department, which is responsible for organizing next month's elections across the country.

The Sept. 8 parliamentary, gubernatorial, regional, and municipal elections will take place in

four regions that regularly face Ukrainian shelling — the Kursk and Bryansk regions, as well as annexed Crimea and Sevastopol — along with the nearby Volgograd, Lipetsk and Tula regions.

But the Kursk region, where Ukrainian forces have controlled hundreds of square kilometers of land for nearly three weeks, presents the biggest headache for the regime.

Over 130,000 Russians have been displaced from their homes in areas near the border since the start of Ukraine's surprise offensive and roughly 2,000 more are missing — a scale of displacement not seen since the end of World War II. Nearly 20,000 Kursk region residents remain in Ukraine-controlled areas.

Those forced to flee have [expressed](#) anger toward Russian authorities, citing their apparent failure to defend the border and to organize aid for civilians effectively and quickly.

As soon as it became clear that Ukraine's offensive was well-prepared and had been planned far in advance, the Kremlin faced a dilemma: take the risk and hold elections in the Kursk region, or postpone the voting to protect civilians.

While state-run media initially deployed their usual strategy of downplaying the scale of the crisis, authorities were forced to declare a federal state of emergency in the region.

This state of emergency suggests that the elections should be canceled. However, the Central Election Commission (CEC), which operates in close cooperation with the Kremlin, ordered it to go on as planned, with bulletproof vests and helmets [provided](#) to local election officials. Only a handful of municipal elections have been [postponed](#).

The CEC has extended the voting period in the Kursk gubernatorial election, allowing residents to vote at polling stations or online between Aug. 28 and Sept. 5. Elsewhere, voting will take place from Sept. 6 to 8.

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These measures are intended to “ensure the safety, protection of life, and health of residents,” the CEC [said](#) in a statement.

Independent election observers have regularly criticized Russia's multi-day and online voting schemes, saying they make it impossible to organize high-quality independent observation of election integrity.

To secure the regional capital of Kursk, authorities promised to [install](#) up to 60 concrete shelters on the city streets.

Acting Kursk Governor Alexei Smirnov, Putin's personal appointee, was nominated by the pro-Kremlin United Russia party and is likely to easily win given the lack of real opposition, according the independent election watchdog [Golos](#).

“It is crucial for us to hold the election of the governor nominated by the chief [Putin],” an official familiar with the discussions told Politika.Kozlov.

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian law strictly stated that in the event of an unstable situation, much less hostilities, elections would be postponed.

Since then, however, the State Duma has passed a raft of [amendments](#) allowing voting in the March 2024 presidential election in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine to take place amid ongoing fighting and martial law.

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“Considering that the Russian authorities recognized the elections there [Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions] as legitimate, the fact that part of Kursk region is now under Ukraine is not a problem at all,” an official close to the Kremlin said.

“The Kremlin believes their military strategy is delivering results. The troops are pushing the Ukrainians further in the Donetsk region. This is the most important thing. And in terms of the 1,200-kilometer front, the situation in the Kursk region is a local tactical crisis,” said the official, who previously worked in the security services.

He said that the authorities considered postponing the Kursk gubernatorial election by one year, which would have reduced risks for voters and election commissions.

“But why give the enemy the feeling that he has brushed up against our weakness? Better to let them know that we won't be scared, we'll hold the elections,” the official said.

The Russian official acknowledged that the situation in Kursk is a real crisis and that the war had come to Russian territory.

But at the Kremlin's orders, state television maintains that everything with the war is going according to plan — and that “we just need to be patient for the sake of the greater goal: the seizure of the entire territory of Donbas,” he said.

An independent Russian political expert who requested anonymity because he is still in Russia explained the ease with which the Russian regime is willing to hold voting in the regions to the cannonade of exploding shells.

“The Kremlin is proud that despite the war, it held a presidential campaign in March 2024 and Putin was re-elected for another term, even though there were voices in his inner circle in favor of postponing the election, but Zelensky [couldn't](#). He didn't have the guts!”, the expert said.

In the Kremlin's mindset, he said, “Putin is a legitimate leader of the state and Zelensky is a weakling who can be trolled at every opportunity. Which Putin does with regularity.”

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