

Mass abstention in Russian regional elections

Clara Weiss**13 September 2013**

Russia's regional elections last Sunday were marked by mass abstention. Voter participation was less than one third in almost every region.

Only in three regions did more than half of the electorate vote: in Chechnya in the north Caucasus, which has been devastated by two wars (87 percent), in the Kemrovskaya oblast (64 percent) and in the autonomous region Tchukotskiy in the far east (58 percent). In several regions participation was less than 25 or even 20 percent.

Elections were held for governors in eight regions, representatives to regional parliaments in 16 regions and the mayors in nine cities, including Moscow, Vladivostok, Yekaterinburg, Voronezh and Velekiy Novgorod. The candidates of the Kremlin-backed United Russia party won all of the elections for governor.

Many regions where elections took place are in deep economic crisis or in outright recession. Mass layoffs have taken place in many locations since the crisis intensified in 2012. As part of the Kremlin's austerity measures from 2013 to 2015, hospitals and high schools are to be closed, while prices for electricity, water and gas are to rise rapidly.

The mayoral candidates of United Russia and those for governor rarely received more than half of the votes. Given the low rate of participation, this means that at most 10-15 percent of those eligible to vote supported the government's policies. Opposition candidates were also only backed by a small fraction of the population.

The elections are part of a struggle for power within the ruling elite and layers of the upper-middle class close to it. Confronted with the deep social crisis and political tensions within ruling circles, the Kremlin felt compelled to make concessions to these layers and make the participation by the opposition in the elections easier.

The Kremlin refrained from widespread vote rigging. Although vote rigging was reported in some regions and opposition candidates were partly blocked, according to election observers there was much less rigging than in the national parliamentary elections of 2011. In this year's elections, 54 parties were allowed to take part, nine times as many as in the past.

In the election for Moscow mayor, the prominent opposition politician Alexei Navalny was allowed to challenge the Kremlin-backed Sergei Sobyanin, who had held the position. With a participation rate of just over 30 percent, 27 percent voted for Navalny, who ran for the liberal RPR-Parnas party. Sobyanin won with 51 percent of the vote, less than had been expected. More than half of all registered voters took part in the last mayoral election.

Navalny was sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement in a politically motivated trial in July. However, following an order from the Kremlin, he was released to allow him to run in the mayoral election. Navalny's release was a calculated attempt by the Kremlin to bring dissatisfied sections of the upper-middle class and ruling circles back on board, while also giving their own candidates, whose victory was never in doubt, more legitimacy.

Openly supported by the western media, Navalny was the best-known leader of the protest movement in 2011 and 2012 and has subsequently become the liberal opposition's figurehead. He speaks for a section of the upper-middle class which is dissatisfied with the distribution of political power, wealth and income at the top of society and argues for a stronger pro-Western orientation in foreign policy.

Navalny's election campaign was financed by 37 companies and leading Internet magnates who offered a "social contract" in exchange for Navalny's commitment to protect their property rights. According to British journalist Ben Judah, Navalny has for some

years had the support of Michael Friedman, currently the second-richest oligarch in Russia, and from Bill Browder, the head of investment bank Hermitage Capital.

Former deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov, long one of the Kremlin's most influential figures, and former President Dmitri Medvedev enthusiastically followed Navalny's rise from early on, according to Judah.

The ruling elite can be assured of Navalny's support in the expansion of state repression and attacks on the working class. In a September 5 interview with the newspaper *gazeta.ru*, Navalny presented himself as a "law-and-order" candidate of finance capital.

Navalny said that investment bankers from Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, had handed out flyers for his campaign. At the same time, he backed the expansion of security cameras in Moscow and boasted that of all the candidates, he had the hardest line on immigration. He called for the public performance of the Caucasian folk dance *Lesginka* to be banned.

In the city of Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains, the Kremlin also allowed opposition candidate Yevgeni Roisman to run, and he obtained around a third of the vote against United Russia's candidate. Electoral participation stood at 31 percent. Roisman stood for the Citizens Platform founded by the oligarch Michael Prokhorov.

A former businessman and representative in the Duma (parliament), Roisman stands as far to the right as Navalny. He became known for his project "city without drugs," under which drug addicts were violently forced to quit. Roisman called for a visa system like Navalny, to prevent people from central Asia and the Caucasus from travelling to Russia, and led a witch-hunt against Muslims. In an interview with Ben Judah, Roisman claimed that "all drugs in this city are sold by gypsies and Tajiks."

In the mayoral election in Petropavlovsk, where only around one in five voted, the liberal candidate Galina Shirshina won. In the elections for the city council in the Siberian town of Krasnoyarsk, the right-wing Patriots of Russia achieved 14 seats, two more than the Kremlin-backed party United Russia.

The Patriots of Russia, a split-off from the Stalinist Russian Communist Party, were supported by Anatoly Bykov, a notorious mafia boss implicated in the so-

called aluminum war in the 1990s.

While the Kremlin gave the privileged layers in the opposition somewhat more freedom, they are preparing for intensification of social tensions and of attacks on the working class.

The liberal newspaper *Nezavizimaya Gazeta* commented on September 10 that the elections would be viewed as a "success ... which clears the way for new unpopular decisions like tax increases, wage freezes and energy consumption charges."

The budget for 2013-15 has already laid out plans to close a third of all high schools, as well as several hospitals and maternity units. For the first time, President Vladimir Putin associated himself with the announcement of plans to cut social spending. Putin had previously sought publicly to distance himself from his government's austerity measures.

The finance ministry is planning budget cuts of around 5 percent. The lower levels of the state bureaucracy will be impacted, with many losing their public sector jobs, while the substantial salaries for the upper layers of the bureaucracy are to rise further.



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