

# Russian government cracks down on protesters during regional elections

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On Sunday, some 65 million Russians were called upon to vote in 80 different regional elections, including 21 direct gubernatorial elections and 16 local assembly elections.

The Russian government has not yet released an official turnout figure for the entire country, but indicated that it was similar to the turnout at the 2013 regional elections, when only three regions saw voter participation above 50 percent.

In stark contrast to the elections five years ago, United Russia candidates for governor failed to gain an absolute majority in four regional elections. In some regions, the voter turnout was reported to be well below 30 percent. In some elections, United Russia candidates saw their vote reduced by as much as 20 to 30 percent.

In four regions, Khakassia, Vladimir Oblast, Khabarovsk Krai, and Primorsky Krai, the United Russia candidates failed to win an absolute majority and will have to run in a second round. In Khakassia and the Primorsky Krai, the United Russia candidates will be competing against candidates of the Stalinist KPRF. In Khakassia, the KPRF's candidate Valentin Konovalov received 44.81 percent of the votes, as opposed to United Russia's candidate, Viktor Zimin, who received 32.42 percent.

In the Khabarovsk Krai, and in the Vladimir Oblast, a region northeast of Moscow and one of the most socially devastated in the European part of Russia, United Russia candidates are running against candidates of the fascistic LDPR. A second round in direct gubernatorial elections, which were reintroduced in 2012, has only taken place once before.

In three regions, the Irkutsk Oblast, Khakassia and the Ulyanovsk Oblast, United Russia lost its majority in the regional legislative assemblies to the Stalinist KPRF.

In Moscow, where less than 30 percent of voters cast their ballot, incumbent mayor Sergey Sobyanin was

reelected with almost 70 percent of the votes, significantly more than in the last elections. Only five other people had been put on the ballot in Moscow, and no opposition politician participated.

The head of United Russia, Andrei Turchak, announced that the party would “draw organizational and personnel conclusions” in the regions where it had fared poorly. President Vladimir Putin commented very little on the elections, and stated only that the “election campaign as a whole was worthy” and that the elections were among the most honest that had taken place in recent Russian history.

The elections were overshadowed by what is now the overriding issue in Russian politics: the government's plans to raise the retirement age. The current government bill provides for a raising of the retirement age for women by eight years, from 55 to 63, and for men by five years, from 60 to 65—an age less than two thirds of Russian men actually reach.

Over 90 percent of the population oppose this measure, and 53 percent indicated in a recent Levada poll that they are ready to take to the streets to protest the pension reform. Its announcement in mid-July, at the beginning of the FIFA World Cup, United Russia plummeted some 13 percent in the polls, while Putin's approval rating slumped to a four-year low of around 67 percent. Ten days before Sunday's elections, Putin came out in support of the pension reform, proposing only to lower the hike in the retirement age for women from eight to five years.

It has been widely acknowledged by both United Russia politicians and political commentators that the enormous unpopularity of the reform was the central reason for United Russia's poor performance and the relative success of the KPRF, which has presented itself as the main critic of the reform. However, given the overwhelming opposition to the reform, it is striking that the opposition was able to benefit relatively little from

United Russia's unpopularity.

The Kremlin's extreme nervousness about the widespread hostility toward the pension reform found an expression in the violent crackdown on protesters demonstrating against it on Sunday, following the call of the right-wing opposition leader Alexei Navalny. A day before the elections, Google had taken down a YouTube video by Navalny on the pension reform following demands by Russian lawmakers, who argued that the dissemination of his video was counter to Russian law which prohibits campaigning during the last 48 hours before polling.

Only about 8,000 people participated in Sunday's protests, which took place in some 25 towns and cities, reflecting the hostility and suspicion toward Navalny. However, the police cracked down on the protesters with particular ferocity, arresting over 1,000, among them many youth. At least 452 people were arrested in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city. Several people were beaten up by the police. Among those arrested nationwide were 26 out of 46 regional staff coordinators of Navalny.

The police crackdown was aimed not so much directly at the supporters of the jailed Alexei Navalny, a right-wing Russian nationalist and supporter of US imperialism, who represents sections of the Russian oligarchy that are opposed to Putin's foreign policy and fear that the pension reform will provoke a social explosion that neither section of the ruling class will be able to control. (See also: What does Russian "opposition leader" Alexei Navalny represent?)

Above all, the police violence against the protesters was designed to intimidate the millions of Russian workers and youth who neither voted nor went out to protest under Navalny's banners, but are seething with anger about the pension reform and the Kremlin's policies. They will have to turn to a socialist program and align themselves with their class brothers and sisters around the world in order to fight against the social onslaught and right-wing politics of all sections of the Russian oligarchy.



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