

Kremlin suffers defeats in regional elections

Andrea Peters
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Russia's ruling party, United Russia, suffered a number of defeats in recent regional elections. The electoral upsets come amidst widespread popular opposition to the passage of a bill raising the official retirement age by five years for both men and women.

In voting held in early September to elect representatives to local assemblies, United Russia won less than 50 percent of the ballots cast in eleven of the sixteen races. In three regions—Irkutsk, an area in Siberia that borders Lake Baikal and is home to nearly 2.5 million people, Ulyanovsk, which is southeast of Moscow and has a population of almost 1.3 million, and Khakassia, a Russian republic with around a half million residents located north of the country's border with Mongolia, China, and Kazakhstan—United Russia lost altogether to the Communist Party by between two and six percent.

In addition, four of the Kremlin-backed candidates for regional governorships failed to win a majority. This resulted in run-off elections in three places and the invalidation of the election in another, amidst claims of voter fraud.

In Primorsky Krai, a region in Russia's far east and home to the port city Vladivostok, officials were compelled to throw out a narrow win by United Russia incumbent candidate Andrei Tarasenko. His opponent, the Communist Party's Andrei Ishchenko, was in the lead in ballot counting until the very last minute when, suddenly, he lost by 7,000 votes. Allegations of voting irregularities affecting precincts that accounted for at least 24,000 votes, more than enough to have changed the outcome of the election, prompted protests. New elections are now scheduled to take place in December, and Putin has ordered Tarasenko be replaced by an interim leader, a United Russia representative who previously governed Sakhalin.

In Khabarovsk, the federal region just north of Primorsky Krai, the Kremlin's candidate lost heavily in

a second-round run-off vote to the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) candidate, Sergei Furnal. While both sides claimed electoral fraud, the Central Election Commission declared that whatever violations occurred were not enough to shift the results. A similar outcome occurred in Vladimir Oblast, due east of Moscow, where the incumbent United Russia candidate lost in a run-off vote to the LDPR challenger by about 20 percent.

In Khakassia, United Russia also failed to secure the governorship. Its candidate, Viktor Zimin, lost to the Communist Party's Konstantin Konovalov by about 12 percent. Election authorities scheduled and then cancelled a run-off for October 7, postponing the second round of voting until October 21. Zimin and a third candidate from the Just Russia party have now dropped out of the race. Konovalov will face off against the fourth-place winner in a few weeks.

A recent report on the September elections by foreign policy institute BMB observes, "Shifts in basic measures of economic well-being since 2014—unemployment, population below minimum wage, and changes in median incomes—were strongly correlated with the decline in UR support."

In Khakassia, over 17 percent of the population make less than the minimum wage recognized by the federal government as necessary to survive, and male life expectancy is lower than the recently-raised legal retirement age.

In the wake of the electoral turmoil, the Kremlin, which has the right to appoint interim governors, has replaced the leaders of Astrakhan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and the country's second largest city, St. Petersburg.

The election results point to the possibility of regionalist tendencies emerging in Russia, as local leaders in the country's nominal opposition work to take advantage of social discontent and simultaneously enrich themselves.

In commenting on the broader implications of the declining support for UR, the authors of the BMB note, “For investors—both foreign and domestic—this means that the investment and operating environment will become increasingly fragmented across different regions.” Russia is made up of disparate regions that vary substantially in terms of their industrial base, natural resources, socio-cultural features, and their roles in the national and global economy.

Further evidence of the ruling party’s unpopularity continues to mount. On Friday, Russia’s Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) announced the results of a new poll that showed that the ruling party’s approval rating has fallen to a record low. Were elections to the parliament to be held now, UR would garner just 31 percent of the vote, a slide of 5 to 10 percent from July of this year and down from a recent high of 55 percent in 2015.



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