

The October Elections in Russia as a Test for Putin's Regime

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Anyone thinking that election season is over in Russia could be in for a surprise. October could prove a momentous month for Russia as regional and local elections come under the spotlight. All elections pose serious challenges for hybrid regimes like the one in Russia and the political crisis which started on the eve of the 2011–2012 electoral cycle is far from over. The authorities did not manage to increase their legitimacy in the parliamentary and presidential elections and have been forced to continue with populist politics. This means, among other things, that (a) the government is unable to implement much-needed socio-economic reforms and (b) the Kremlin is too busy with domestic politics and with the internal situation to undertake any serious moves internationally.

The Kremlin has proved unwilling to modernize an old-fashioned political system and this has deepened the political crisis. Instead of treating the illness by concentrating on the reasons for political protests, the authorities have tried to cover up the symptoms.

The local elections on 14 October could play an important role in shaping Russia's future political development. They are the first to be held since the Kremlin-loyal party United Russia's poor results in the December 2011 parliamentary elections and the first to take place since the political protests began in earnest, especially in Moscow.

The forthcoming elections are not only important for the authorities and for an emerging opposition aiming to convert the relative strength it has gained into victories at the ballot box. They are even more important for a Russian society which is awakening from a lethargic sleep and demanding more public and competitive politics.

More than being afraid of elections, the Russian authorities are afraid of public scandals in connection with them and the political protests that would follow if

too overt tactics such as ballot-rigging were used. They are therefore using administrative resources on a large scale to ensure electoral victory without having to resort to widespread falsification of the results again. This is the same tactic used in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the March 2012 presidential elections, where the result needed was achieved by mass administrative mobilization and manipulation rather than by ordinary electoral fraud.

In October 2012, elections are taking place in a dozen regions where either governors or regional assemblies are to be elected, plus half a dozen regional centres with city councils and numerous smaller municipalities. Five regions—Amur, Belgorod, Bryansk, Novgorod and Ryazan—are set to hold gubernatorial elections on 14 October, the first regions to do so since 2004, when elections for regional governors were abolished. The Kremlin closely screened the regions and decided to permit elections only where no surprises were expected. In strategically important regions and regions where the incumbent was politically weak, Moscow had reappointed governors before the new law on election of the governors was passed.

Regarding the law on electing governors, it is likely that the current system of three 'filters' could prove superfluous and politically impractical even for the Kremlin. The filters include a requirement for candidates to collect the signatures of 5–10 per cent of all municipal deputies; to obtain support from 75 per cent of the municipalities of the given region; or to document support from 90–95 per cent of the rank-and-file rural deputies. Although the filters are useful for excluding inconvenient candidates, they could prove counterproductive in reducing political tensions. They aggravate the opposition and fail to give the mounting social pressure a vent.

Incumbent governors are favored in each election. They are expected to win easily in the Amur, Belgorod and Novgorod regions, and will encounter some difficulties in the Bryansk and Ryazan regions. The governors to be elected will not enjoy sufficient legitimacy, but this is at least to an extent in the Kremlin's interests —popular and autonomous heads of regions do not suit the Kremlin.

Apart from the gubernatorial elections, legislative assemblies will be elected in six other areas in October: in Penza, Saratov, Sakhalin and Krasnodar regions and the republics of Udmurtia and North Ossetia. With the authorities keeping a tight rein on the situation, no surprises are expected, with the possible exception of Sakhalin. In the Krasnodar region, where the recent floods and allegations of negligence by the authorities could lead to a backlash vote against United Russia, the government has exchanged the less than popular governor with the speaker of Krasnodar's Duma at the top of United Russia's list. Almost all parliamentary races take place in regions with controlled voting and wide usage of spoiler parties to split the vote. Because of this, United Russia is counting on relative electoral successes.

United Russia politicians are bracing themselves for serious problems and possible defeat in the elections to city councils in Barnaul, Vladivostok, Kursk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Tver, Cherkessk and Yaroslavl, as well as in the mayoral races in Kaliningrad, Nizhny Tagil and Khimki. These are the cities where the strength of the current political system is being tested. The authorities face two problems in these cities: voters who are very critical of the government, especially in the major regional centres, and much greater transparency and public attention, which makes it difficult to employ the kind of electoral manipulation used in the past. The relatively strong results for strong candidates backed by the United Russia in past mayoral races in Krasnoyarsk and Omsk cannot be extended to the party lists in, say, Vladivostok, where the ruling party has lost authority. The municipal elections could thus prove the most interesting.

The Kremlin and regional authorities in many cases still enjoy almost complete control over the election process, but they are afraid to provoke mass protests. They are thus ready to accept a defeat of their candidate, as happened in the Yaroslavl mayoral elections in March–April 2012.

It is for this kind of less controlled elections without a predefined result that authorities are making preparations for future, switching to the single voting day in early September in order to avoid active campaigns in July and August, when everybody is on vacation. The authorities are also trying to make it more difficult for independent observers by introducing new rules of special registration for them.

The authorities thus continue to respond to the political demands for change from an active part of Russian society by employing political manipulations, but these manipulations, however sophisticated, will not defuse the political crisis. There is an old Soviet joke about how different leaders reacted to the fact that the train they were on had come to a standstill. Brezhnev ordered the curtains to be closed and the wagon to be rocked from side to side to create the illusion that the train was moving forward. It looks as if today's Kremlin is behaving in similar fashion.

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The views expressed in this briefing are those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of the FOI.

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October 14 elections in Russia



Major elections:

- Gubernatorial elections
- Elections to the Legislative Assemblies

- Elections to city councils
- Mayoral elections
- Selected municipal elections

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