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REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA

THE KREMLIN IS TACKLING PREVIOUS CHALLENGES WHILE FACING NEW ONES

The Kremlin is trying to learn lessons from old problems regarding its electoral authoritarian system, but new ones are constantly emerging. At the heart of these is the Kremlin's party system.

This year, Russia's regional elections were a follow-up to the ones held in 2018. In 2018, the principal focus was on the re-election of Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, which played out according to the Kremlin's script. By contrast, candidates from the Kremlin's ruling party, United Russia, lost as many as four gubernatorial elections. Primorsky Krai in Russia's Far East witnessed the biggest scandal when Communist Party of the Russian Federation candidate Andrei Ishchenko was rejected after the second round, despite his victory. The election was eventually cancelled and Kremlin candidate Oleg Kozhemyako was appointed as acting governor.

The central lesson from the 2018 regional elections for the regime was the issue of a possible second round, which puts much pressure on the

regime's candidates, as well as of those candidates who receive protest votes. The reputation of the main opposition parties in the Duma, the Russian Liberal Democratic Party and the Communist Party, as genuine political alternatives is also weak. However, in the regional elections, it was the Communist Party's "too oppositional" candidates in particular, and candidates who might gather protest votes that appeared to pose a risk to the regime.

As many as sixteen governors were elected in this year's regional elections. It seems that avoiding the scandals that dogged the 2018 elections has been a top priority for the regime. The Kremlin candidate has now won all sixteen elections in the first round. The election observation agency Golos reported more than 2 000 contraventions this year,

which provides a clear indication of the spirit in which the Kremlin foisted its favourites into power.

In St. Petersburg, President Putin's trusted Alexander Beglov, the highly unpopular governor, proved to be a headache for the Kremlin until election day. In polls, Beglov's strongest contender, the Communist Party's 73-year-old Vladimir Bortko, stood a good chance of taking the race to the second round, and then winning with protest votes. But less than a week before election day, Bortko withdrew from the race – apparently following the Kremlin's instructions – and the two remaining contenders no longer had a real chance. For certainty's sake, the reported turnout guaranteed the "correct" result. At 6pm the turnout was declared to be around 24%, but at 8pm when

the polling stations closed it was as high as 42%. Natural voting activity or the lack thereof does not explain this change.

If the Kremlin managed to prevent risky second rounds in the gubernatorial elections, in 2019 the municipal elections and the elections of regional legislative assemblies remained the regime’s blind spot. In 2013, the Kremlin brought forward its nationwide election day from October to early September. The logic is clear for an authoritarian regime that fears elections. Elections that take place after the silent July–August season complicate possible opposition campaigning when people are out of town. Yet the events in Moscow this summer showed, at the very least, that this measure did not prevent the municipal elections, regarded as politically insignificant, from turning into a major political crisis.

The eroding position of United Russia has become particularly acute in Moscow. Following Sobyanin’s initiative, Moscow’s 45-seat council was elected from 45 single-member constituencies into which the capital was divided. This did not eliminate the problem of weak parties, however. Moreover, a new problem was the strongly mobilized opposition whose candidates managed to collect the required sig-

natures for their nomination despite the summer lull. In polls, several opposition candidates were favoured in their constituencies, while many Kremlin candidates had great difficulties in collecting the signatures they needed by honest means.

As panic loomed, the Moscow administration, assisted by the Kremlin, exacerbated the crisis by using false pretexts to prevent all independent candidates from taking part in the election. The authorities responded even more brutally to the demands by thousands of Muscovites to approve their candidates. Hundreds were arrested, including several opposition candidates. These measures mobilized unprecedented numbers of people to oppose the administrative as well as physical violence inflicted by the authorities.

Although the regime did not give in to the opposition’s demands by election day, it was unable to counter the influence of opposition leader Alexey Navalny’s well-promoted “smart voting”. This concerned tactical voting in a situation where the opposition’s own candidates were not approved. Based on probabilities, Navalny offered each constituency a “least bad” candidate, that is, anyone other than a candidate supported by the regime. In Moscow and Khabarovsk in particular, United Russia suffered a humiliat-

ing defeat. Whereas United Russia had received 38 out of 45 seats in the 2014 election, the number now fell to 25. In Khabarovsk, United Russia received only around 13% of the vote, and lost in all constituencies in the region. In St. Petersburg, delaying the municipal election results for several days after polling day implied that those results were humiliating as well.

The 2019 regional elections served to highlight the growing problems besetting the Kremlin’s political coordination. At the heart of these problems is the crisis afflicting the Kremlin’s party system. As a result, a new problem is the supply and control of non-party candidates. The Kremlin’s need for renewed legitimacy through elections is becoming increasingly acute as the 2021 Duma election is approaching. In the Kremlin’s ideal situation, it would have several equally strong candidates who could genuinely compete with each other. The problem is that there are not enough strong pro-regime candidates, not even for prestigious positions. Alexander Beglov, the highly unpopular governor in St. Petersburg, Russia’s second largest city, is a case in point. Moreover, controlling independent candidates is much more laborious than controlling the political process through the loyal parties.